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2 Corinthians 8:5

In 2 Corinthians 8, the Lord, through the apostle Paul, urges rich generosity on the part of God's people toward his work, which is most important in our lives and in our world. Some other Sunday we'll talk about our stewardship of money. Today we'll talk about our stewardship of time and abilities, our stewardship of the very lives that God has given to us.

"They gave themselves first to the Lord."

Dear fellow redeemed,

When I was a young boy, my family lived on a hog farm, fifteen miles from town, fifteen miles from our church. One of my fond memories of those years was riding along with my father to take the pigs to market. First the pigs had to be loaded up. Dad would back the old farm truck up to the ramp, open the gates, and then drive the largest of the pigs out of the pens, up the ramp and into the back of the truck -- not an easy job, because hogs are not the most cooperative animals when it comes to going where you want them to. After he had about thirty or forty of those 200-pound hogs in the truck, I'd try to tell him, "Dad, the truck is full." But he wouldn't listen. He would always squash a few more in, explaining that if you cram them in tight enough, they can't move. They can't fall and get hurt when you stop or go around a corner. After the hogs were all loaded, dad would put the large tailgates back in place, and then he would wrap a heavy log chain around the bulging sides of the truck to keep everything intact for the ride.

Then came the fun part, the drive into town. It took a long time to get there, it seemed like hours, the truck was so slow, but I didn't mind, because I loved to ride in that truck. It was a 1946. I don't recall the make or model. Now I'm not that old. The truck was about twenty years old at the time. It had never been inside, except when at the shop getting fixed. It was loud, no radio, but if you listened you could hear what sounded like music through the whining of the engine. The seat was huge, but you dare not sit against the door, for fear it might swing open. If you sat in the middle of the seat, you had to be careful that you didn't get jabbed by the long shift lever. I had a hard time seeing much through the high windshield, but I could look down at the floor, and I could see the road going by through the holes in the floor.

Dad didn't use the old truck much, mostly just to take pigs to market. As it sat in the yard my older brother and I sometimes liked to play in it, though we weren't supposed to. For us, the most fascinating thing about that truck was the starter pedal. You didn't start the engine with the key. You turned the ignition on, and then pushed the starter pedal with your foot to engage the starter and crank the engine. We never did figure out the part about turning on the ignition, we were too taken up with the starter pedal. Even

with the ignition off, it would still crank the engine, and if the truck was in gear, it would lunge the truck forward or backward a foot or two. It was mostly my brother who did that.

I recall a winter Sunday morning. There had been a snow-storm the night before and the driveway was blown shut with three-foot snow drifts. There was no way to get the car out. How were we going to get to church? Crammed in the cab of that hog-hauling truck, My mom and Dad, my brother, two sisters and I, no heat, but that didn't matter, because we were cozily packed in there, about as tight as dad packed the hogs in the back. We slowly made our way those fifteen long miles over snow-covered roads to church.

Now, sixty years later, my parents have way over 100 children and grandchildren, spouses and great-grandchildren living in numerous states across the nation. But on Sunday morning they know where their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren are -- in church, worshiping the God of our salvation. Why is that? Because of that truck? Not merely because of that truck, but because worshiping God is unquestionably the most important thing in life.

My family was no better than any other family. We were a sinful family, and that's why we needed church so much. I was privileged to grow up in a home where God and his word came first. My prayer is that that will continue to be the case for my family, so that in twenty years from now I know where all of my grandchildren and great-grandchildren are on Sunday morning. My prayer is that that will continue to be the case for all the members of our congregation, so that in twenty years from now I know where all of you and all of your families are on Sunday morning.

We can sense the great joy of the apostle Paul as he reports about the members of the Macedonian churches: "They gave themselves first to the Lord!" These people had not always had the precious gospel. Paul had first proclaimed it to them just a few short years earlier. They treasured that gospel like people in our missions today, who ask the missionary, "Why didn't you come earlier, before my parents and grandparents died?" They very quickly realized the eternal importance of the Lord in their lives and in the lives of their family members.

Those of us who have had the gospel all our lives may easily take it for granted, and simply assume that it will always be there for us whenever we feel we need it. But it is just as eternally important for us to give ourselves to the Lord, especially when we understand who we are by ourselves. For by ourselves we are lost sinners, separated from God, and we would remain lost forever, finally in hell, except God gave himself to us, came here to our world of sin, lived each day of his life for us, and then died our death for us in order to make us his own, to belong to him for all eternity. What total commitment and dedication on the part of our gracious God toward us unworthy creatures. "He died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again." [2 Corinthians 5:15]

They gave ***THEMSELVES*** to the Lord. -- Not just a part of themselves, not just one day a week. They didn't put the Lord on a shelf somewhere where they could get him when they felt they needed him. They gave themselves to the Lord!

It should be noted that by ourselves we cannot give ourselves to the Lord, for by ourselves we are enemies of God and could only rebel against him. But through his holy word God has come to us and worked the miracle of faith in our hearts and changed our

hearts to follow his ways. We need the power of God's word in our lives every day so that we give ourselves to the Lord in all that we do, so that whether we eat or drink, or whatever we do, we do it all to the glory of God, so that we say each day, "Lord, use my life, all that I am and all that I have, to serve you this day according to your word." It is only by the grace of God that we can give ourselves to him. Paul says the same about the Christians in Macedonia: "We want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches," that they so wholeheartedly serve the Lord. What a great privilege and blessing it is to give ourselves to the Lord, to so belong to him each day, and for all eternity! God has worked this miracle for us and in us!

They gave themselves ***FIRST*** to the Lord. The Lord was the first and foremost thing in their lives. The word "first" has to do not only with time, but also with priorities. Time is an interesting thing. Everyone has the same amount of time each day, each week, each month, each year, and we all make the statement, "I don't have time for this, or I don't have time for that." We're simply saying, "This particular thing is not first in my life. Something else is first, and I'm going to spend my time with that." It's simply a matter of priorities.

How important it is that the Lord be first in our lives, so that we always have time for him, for worshiping him, for studying his word, for doing his work in our congregation, and serving him in our lives! He demands to be number one in our lives in order that his blessings might always be upon us. Too often we see the sad consequences when people don't put the Lord first. One thing after another gets in the way of the Lord in their lives, so that soon they have little or no time to worship or serve him. Their family is often starved of God's word, and also given a poor example. As time goes by, tragically, they and their families are often lost, lost from God forever.

How important that the Lord be first, that it be our first priority to worship him every Sunday. Shortly after Jesus' resurrection, the Christians set aside the first day of the week for worship, and referred to that first day of each week as "the Lord's day." There is even a reference to this in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians when he says, "On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income." [16:2] Paul was encouraging that their generous offerings be given as a part of their worship each Sunday. It is necessary for us to be here in church every Sunday for our own sake, to have the privilege of worshiping the God who made us, the God who saved us, the God to whom we belong for all eternity.

It is also necessary that we be here in church every Sunday for the sake of others. In Hebrews 10, God's word urges us, "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another -- and all the more as you see the Day approaching." [v.25] The approaching Day is the Last Day, or the day when we will be in heaven. We want all those around us in our congregation to be in heaven with us. How important that we encourage them by joining our voices with theirs in praising our God, and our ears with theirs listening together to the message of salvation that feeds and sustains our souls. How important that we bring our families to church each week, and set a good example for them and everyone else.

Don't let other things keep you away from that which is first and most important. Sports, recreation or leisure dare not compete with church and our worship of our Lord. If you need a day off, take a day off from work. Don't take a day off from worshiping the Lord. Our church attendance should be more regular and better than our work

attendance. It's more important. Our children's church and Sunday School attendance should be better than their school attendance. It's more important. If you have company or a family gathering, bring them with you to church, or if they won't come, at least give them the proper example by coming yourself. Maybe the next time they'll come along. Try to avoid being out of away on Sunday, but if you have to be, visit and worship at one of our sister congregations. We have a book that lists all of our congregations, their locations and worship times. We're more than happy to help you find a church to attend.

Let us also be positive about our church and our worship, and speak well of it. If we complain about things at church, we're only hurting ourselves, our families and the people around us. If we complain about the hymns, or that the service is too long, aren't we forgetting what's first? If we've given ourselves first to the Lord, then it would be totally out of character for us to complain about the hymns of praise we sing to him, or that it takes too long to worship him. "Let's get out of here so we can do more important things." No, the Lord is first!

Isn't this an amazing thing -- the Lord is there for us, in spite of the many times when we have failed to put him first in our lives and in our schedules. He still loves us. He still forgives us, as he assures us: "Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness." [Lamentations 3:22]

Our Lord Jesus went to the cross without complaint. He spent three long hours forsaken by his heavenly Father for us. He had time for us. He put us first, in order that we might spend time with him for all eternity. What a privilege it is for us to worship the God of our salvation, to say with the Psalmist, "I love the house where you live, O LORD, the place where your glory dwells." [26:8]

Amen.

May the Lord our God be with us as he was with our fathers; may he never leave us or forsake us. May he turn our hearts to him, to walk in all his ways. Amen.