

South Bay Community Church
Sermon Reflection
Generosity Factor: Let's Excel
22 February 2021
Pastor Tammy Long

Check in, Opening Prayer

Scripture Text: 2 Corinthians 8:1-7

Sermon Preamble

Visions that inspire us to want to excel begin by catching something deep within us. We may see something or hear something that evokes a voice inside that says, "I want to do that." Sometimes we catch a glimpse of how we would like to contribute and make a difference in the world. It's not about just wanting fame or fortune, but it is about a stirring that causes us to want to excel and do more for a purpose higher than ourselves. Often God plants stirrings for what God would have us do or be, even if those stirrings seem beyond what is possible at the time.

The Invitation to Believers in Corinth

Let's read 2 Corinthians 8:1-7. Upon first hearing this letter to the Corinthian churches, it may seem that Paul is pitting the Corinthian churches and the Macedonian churches against one another. Paul is not declaring that one church is better than the other; Paul is not trying to guilt the Corinthian believers to do something. Instead, Paul is stirring a vision and offering an invitation when he says, "I want you to excel also in this gracious act of giving" (2 Corinthians 8:7). To excel in this gracious act of giving is an idea for them, and also a word for us.

What does it mean to excel in this gracious act of giving? The giving Paul is speaking about is a collection for the poor and destitute Christians in Jerusalem. The collection for the poor in Jerusalem is a relief effort that spanned over many years. As Paul planted and oversaw Gentile churches, he teaches about giving: "On the first day of the week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income" (1 Corinthians 16:2). In accordance with the teachings of Jesus, Paul sees giving as: (1) an act of worship to God, (2) a spiritual service and sacrifice, (3) a ministry of love and a vehicle for ministry. While in Jerusalem, Paul is so committed to the ministry of giving to the believers, that he had to pray to be rescued from death at the hands of unbelievers (Romans 15:30-31). The collection for Jewish Christians demonstrates a commitment to fellow believers tearing down the walls of division between Jews and Gentiles by supporting Jewish brothers and sisters in need, reaffirming that they are one body in Christ.

Why does Paul say to the believers in Corinth that he wants them to excel? They had started the relief effort for the Church in Jerusalem a year ago among the first who wanted to give. At some point they got sidetracked and their giving slowed and possibly stopped. Paul is urging them to finish what they started (2 Corinthians 8:10-11). Paul points to the Macedonian churches as a real-life example to inspire the Corinthian churches to excel in giving. This inspiration is not a command, but it is a test of their hearts and their sincerity as shown in their love for God and neighbor (2 Corinthians 8:8).

Our Treasure Reflects Our Heart

Our ties and feelings about money run very deep, and we are typically very private about our money. What we do with our money reflects what is truly of value to us and what we truly love. Jesus says, “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:21). From time to time, we all need to do a heart check up. We need to ask ourselves where is our heart aligned? For example, when I look at my bank account as my treasure, to what is my heart really attached? Similar to the encouragement last week to do a time audit to determine our priorities for using time, so is the encouragement this week to do a treasure audit to see where our money is really going. Does our money say those things that we want it to say as things really important to us? Have we, like the Corinthians, perhaps gotten off track, lost focus, and even perhaps become lazy in our giving plan?

Life has a way of rushing in and distracting us. The world is forever tempting us and trying to tell us how to spend our money. There are unexpected tsunamis we do not anticipate that can hit us hard, like unplanned medical bills, major repairs, or salary reductions. Before we know it, our money takes a path on its own because life happens. That is why we need a word from time to time to remind us to allow God to speak to us about our money, since it all belongs to God anyway. Every money decision is really a spiritual decision. In the word to the Corinthian believers, Paul is inviting them to check their hearts, and excel in giving and generosity. He uses the churches in Macedonia as a living example.

Churches in Macedonia as an example of excelling in generosity.

First, the Macedonian churches gave despite hard circumstances that they themselves were in. “They are being tested by many troubles (in a severe test of affliction in ESV), and they are very poor” (2 Corinthians 8:2a). The details of their many troubles are not given, but most likely they were suffering the persecution Christians were facing at that time. Not only were they being tested, but Paul says they were also very poor (“extreme poverty” in ESV). The original term in Greek literally means down-to -the-depth poverty; the term we would use today is “dirt poor.” And yet, the churches in Macedonia give regardless.

Second, the Macedonian churches gave out of abundant joy that overflowed in rich generosity: “overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part” (2 Corinthians 8:2b). They seem to embody James 1:2-3 which says, “Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance” (James 1:2-3). Notice the order: they were filled with abundant joy in the Lord first, and then from that joy came rich generosity. These factors made their joy especially rich.

Third, the Macedonian churches gave sacrificially. “For I can testify that they gave not only what they could afford, but far more” 2 Corinthians 8:3a). They were dealing with their own lack and poverty, and yet they stretched beyond their means and gave even more. They sacrificed.

Fourth, the Macedonian churches gave of their own free will. “And they did it of their own free will. They begged us again and again” (2 Corinthians 8:3b-4a). No one commanded, demanded, or hounded them to give. Indeed, Paul declares that they begged again and again to give. Can you imagine a church where the congregation is begging to give as Paul describes?

Fifth, the Macedonian churches regarded giving as a privilege to be able to share in the gift for the believers in Jerusalem. “for the privilege of sharing in the gift for the believers in

Jerusalem” (2 Corinthians 8:4b). Giving for the believers in Macedonia was not a have to, supposed to, ought to, as a burden from an obligation, but giving is a privilege, an opportunity, a pleasure, an honor, and a blessing.

Their generosity surpassed even Paul’s hopes. “They even did more than we had hoped” (2 Corinthians 8:5a). No wonder Paul was excited to tell the Corinthians about the inspiring Macedonian church!

Why would the Macedonian church do this? They could have easily said that someone should be collecting an offering for us in Macedonia. They did not go to such great lengths in generosity to get a building named after them, or for a tax write off, or to be part of Paul’s who’s who of churches. It’s likely that the Macedonian church does not even know that Paul is telling others about them. “for their first action (before they gave money) was to give themselves to the Lord and to us (the work of the Lord), just as God wanted them to do” (2 Corinthians 8:5b).

Their love for God enabled them to catch God’s vision for the poor. Loving God and loving others captures their hearts. From their hearts of love, generosity flowed from the inside out, not the other way around.

The generosity comes back to benefit us. Scientists have found that generosity, even when it costs and we are inconvenienced, it touches a pleasure sensor in our brain. We experience a “warm glow” of satisfaction. So there is a joy that comes from being generous. To feel warm fuzzies on the inside is not the reason we give, for that is a bi-product of a generous God.

We see in Macedonian believers the motivation for generosity that starts first with gratitude and joy for God’s immense generosity towards us. “You know the generous grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by this poverty he could make you rich” (2 Corinthians 8:9). Paul is not talking about material riches, but he is talking about the abundant life Jesus offers with joy, peace, love, grace, forgiveness of sins, the Holy Spirit that resides within us, and a personal relationship with the Creator of the Universe.

These riches we too often take for granted. Praise and worship is so important to us to give God the glory, praise, and worship due His name. We need to let our gratitude meters fill back up every day as we let our hearts fill and burst with love for our King, Lord, and Friend. Generosity will then follow, and we won’t be able to stop it. We will want to excel in giving and generosity, since we’ve been given so much ourselves.

What does all this mean for us at South Bay?

Pastor Tammy Long wants to encourage us to excel in generosity. South Bay is a generous church, but to excel means to go beyond, to be more, and to do more. Was the Macedonian church surprised that out of their love for God, God enabled them to be a blessing to the Christians in Jerusalem? Wouldn’t it be wonderful if SBCC was known across the Bay Area and beyond for our generosity and about ways God has used us for the Kingdom? What we do would not be about us, but about God and the work He is doing. We get to be a part. We get to make His name great. We get to share his love and joy because God’s generosity is too great to contain and keep to ourselves. Can we prayerfully consider how God may be inviting each of us to excel in gracious giving?

There are two steps to consider speaking with God about. The first step is for everyone, and the second step is custom to wherever you are now. Step one is to reflect God's goodness in gratitude. "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights" (James 1:17a). Start a list (can include big items like God sending his Son, to your favorite ice cream, to family, health, sunsets, jazz music, etc.). God gives us spiritual, practical, emotional, and social gifts. God is generous to us in every aspect of our lives. Spend some time and let your heart fill with God's love for you.

The next step depends on where you are as God calls you to excel. If you've never given to the church, become a first time giver. If you aren't sure about church yet, find an organization that affirms what God is doing in affirming love, care, and justice. Take that first step and let God use you to bless another.

Maybe you give occasionally, and feel God inviting you to excel to the next step. For you that may mean becoming a consistent giver. Paul told the Corinthians to set aside a portion of pay each week.

Perhaps you are already a consistent give, then for you to excel in generosity may be to become a tither. A tithe is 10% of income, and it still applies today (Malachi 3:8). Perhaps your financial reality makes 10% too much of a challenge now, and that's okay. For you perhaps to excel is to move closer to the 10 % benchmark by your generosity at a lower percentage of income.

Finally, if you are already tithing, as a number of South Bay members do, perhaps God is inviting you to excel by becoming an extravagant giver. The Bible talks about tithes and offering. The offering is the giving beyond the tithe. This giving above and beyond is pure joy. Let generosity flow as we trust God to take care of us as we partner with what God is doing in the world.

Start with a Heart of Gratitude filled with love for God. Let it overflow in generosity with love for others. Let's excel together.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Sermon Preamble

-What stirrings has God placed in you to contribute with generosity and make a difference in the world?

-If you have a stirring, is that stirring based on the fame and fortune it may bring you?

-Alternatively, is the stirring in you wanting to excel and do more for a purpose higher than yourself? Why is that your motivation?

The Invitation to Believers in Corinth

-Do you think guilt is the best motivator to excel in generosity? Why or why not?

-What is the significance that the giving is for other churches of believers in a distant geographical location and for people of a different culture? What is the significance that Paul directs primarily Gentile churches in Corinth to sacrificially give to Jewish churches in Jerusalem?

-What do you think Paul and God would say to SBCC if it had the opportunity to partner in generosity with churches in the Bay Area and abroad that had a need, even across geographical or cultural divides?

-Do you see the foundation and the start of excelling in giving as an act of worship, spiritual service, and vehicle for ministry of love or do you see the foundation and the start as an obligation? Why?

Our Treasure Reflects Our Heart

-In light of Jesus' statement in Matthew 6:21, should we consider a "treasure audit" to see where our money is really going?

-Does our money say the things we want it to say about what is important to us?

- If our generosity in giving slows or possibly even stops, what should we do? What could be some of the circumstances behind the slowing down of our generosity? Why?

Churches in Macedonia as an example of excelling in generosity.

-What is the significance that the churches in Macedonia, used as an example of excelling in generosity, were going through dire circumstances and were "dirt poor"?

-Which comes first for the Macedonia believers as the "real-life example" of biblical excelling in giving? Is it first the joy in the Lord's abundant giving or is it our giving that makes us feel warm and fuzzy inside? Why?

-Why is their richer joy in sacrificially giving more than what we can afford?

-What is the significance that the churches in Macedonia give of their free will, not as an obligation, even begging for the opportunity to excel in generous giving? Why are they begging to give? How can more of us in SBCC be part of a church that begs to give?

-Why is praise and worship so important as God invites us to excel in generosity and giving?

What does all this mean for us at South Bay? Applying God's Word for good works.

-As the activity to apply the sermon principles to good works, make a list reflecting God's goodness to you and your gratitude for that abundance of spiritual, practical, emotional, and social gifts in every aspect of your lives. First, spend time and let our heart fill with God's personal love for us. Second, is God personally inviting us in our individual situation to the next level of excelling in generosity and giving?