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First, We Give Ourselves

II Corinthians 8:1-9

II Corinthians 8:1-7

¹We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, ²for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. ³For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, ⁴begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints— ⁵and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us. ⁶Accordingly, we urged Titus that as he had started, so he should complete among you this act of grace. ⁷But as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in our love for you— see that you excel in this act of grace also.

Thanks be to God for this, His inerrant Word. As I prepare to preach let me remind those who visit with us and might not be aware of this, that just before the Scripture and the sermon each week we have children's church, a very special ministry to our children. We cancelled that for this one Sunday only - for our five and eight-year-olds - so that they can be with us for the entirety of this service, but it will resume, Lord willing, next Sunday as we usually are accustomed to having, the ministry to our children at that time.

By the way, as we come to this new building, I was thinking about so many of you saying so many things into my ears, and I'm sure into the ears of all the deacons and the elders about the new protocols. You know we won't drink our coffee in here or bring our doughnuts in here or what have you, that's obvious, but today I heard a new one that's very appropriate. And this very concerned person said, "Would you speak about hallway protocol," because we've never had hallways like these, pretty narrow. We need to drive on the right. So I say that to us that, while you're cruising through that you drive on the right. Apparently there have been some collisions this morning as we were driving on the left. But even as we drive on the right, walk on the right that will be a great help.

Isn't it a delight to be in this lovely new place?

[Congregation:] Amen!

Amen. Amen. What a delight, what a joy. Well, what a joy also to see the attitude of the people as they receive it with such humility. And I know that we should develop a sermon around this, and perhaps, Lord willing, I shall, before we leave this ministry, as the new pastor comes. But I was thinking about this as I heard it: an elder and his wife reported to me that when they arrived here on Friday evening, to really start the cleanup, that, you know, they were really girding their loins, as it were, getting ready to clean a bathroom. And they had to stand in line. Because

there were already ahead of them a lot of people that wanted to clean the bathroom. I've never heard of such a thing as that. When somebody asked me about it I said, "I think it is sanctification." That's not the clean work, you know, that I [had] come to do. And you who clean the windows, I imagine, have some relief not to clean the bathrooms. But what a blessing! That spoke to me about this church, really. That this church is grateful, is humbly grateful to God, and really is excited to dig in and to do this. Some of us were by here last Thursday, in that range of time, Friday, before the cleanup started, and you'd have not known it today if you'd not been here. So we salute you and thank you for your diligence and your energy and your hard work. But I remind you that now we have to take care of this building - more later.

Paul is concerned for the saints, but you know his concern is not merely for the saints in trouble, the saints who are financially poor and economically very badly off. His concern is for the saints who are at ease. His concern is for the saints who have more than enough - even for the saints who have plenty. He is deeply concerned for all the saints and these comparatively wealthy Corinthian believers needed to be given an example of what it meant to really, in obedience, serve the Lord as a consequence of His grace to all of us. And so he lifts up, does Paul, these churches in Macedonia.

Now who were they? Well, at least three: there was Philippi, there was Thessalonica, there was Berea - those three at minimum. But these churches, as you're going to see from the text and the sermon, were not affluent churches. They were very needy churches themselves, and yet grace exploded in them in such a way that lessons abound not merely for the Corinthians of the first century, but for the Eagle Heights people of the twenty-first century. What is it we can learn here? The outline is very simple. The first thing we see here is that we learn something about devotion to our Lord, Jesus. That's the first movement here, devotion to the Lord Jesus, but the second thing we learn about this as you come into that relationship with Christ where you are truly devoted to Him, then you begin to develop a godly character. You begin to become more like Him and look more like Him in your life. And thirdly we see, as you devote yourself to Him, and begin to look more like Him, to develop your character after His own, then you begin to sense a new direction for your life. So it's devotion and it's development of character, but it's also a new direction for your life. And then finally we see that there will always be a demonstration in that new direction of who you are in Christ. In other words, you will be about His work and the ministry of His Gospel in this world.

Let's go to the top and look. What lesson is here? Well, the Macedonian believers had apparently learned their lessons well. That is why Paul lists them up as a good example to the Corinthian church. He says in verse five, the first part of verse five, he says, "First, they gave themselves." And, of course, I was pondering this in the light of today, and two weeks from tonight, Lord willing, we dedicate this building to God and His full utilization. I was thinking that that's not the first movement. The dedication of the building, the facilities, the new tool that we have is not the first movement. What is the first movement? Here, first, they gave themselves to the Lord. Their first dedication, their first commitment was to Him. So that later on all that they had or ever would have would be given. So that this building and all the other tools and instruments of ministry that God gives us will be very effectively

used by the Holy Spirit, **if** we first give ourselves. So the sermon title is “First, We Give Ourselves.” Because those Macedonians, Paul says, first gave themselves to the Lord. Verse two reads, “...in a severe test of affliction,” follow this carefully, “... in a severe test of affliction their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.” What? Who ever heard of such an equation as that? Severe affliction, trouble, vexation, persecution, oppression, harassment, weakness, physical need, economic deprivation; in such a time as that here’s the equation: the abundance of joy plus – think about it – plus their real poverty, it says extreme poverty, equals what? Generosity in giving! *[pause]*... to the saints in Jerusalem. What? No, no, no, in a time of recession you close your pockets, you close your wallet, you batten the hatches, you close it all down. You say, “I can’t do that.” If you have cash you guard it. “I’ve got to save this for a rainy day.”

Over the years I’ve spoken in so many churches and I always caution them about laying up big bank accounts. That’s devastatingly dangerous. God has called us to minister. He’s called us to pour ourselves out in service to Him in this world – to pour out everything that He gives us. So Eagle Heights won’t be hoarding anything, well, now you say, “We owe too much. We can’t hoard.” That’s a good reason, huh? No, there’s a deeper reason. We won’t because we’re accustomed to giving to Him – giving it back to Him, who first gave it to us. And that’s the secret to that equation. The abounding joy and extreme poverty equals generous giving of yourself, and your worldly goods to those in Jerusalem who are poor, to those in Winchester who have special needs. An amazing thing. How could this be? Well, question: are you and I ever joyful in severe trouble? Is this ever the pattern of our lives, when we get in trouble when our bank accounts go in reverse, when these go... and I must complain about this again. Why do they always say “go south?” I’m a southerner, and you know, everything bad is “going south.” I’ve never understood that, I just don’t get that. But that’s what they say. I’ve heard bankers say that, “Well, you know, our loans are going south.” I hope they meant they were going down to southwestern Virginia, down to Georgia, down to where ever. I don’t understand that.

But are we ever joyful in difficulty? Are we ever joyful in difficulty? What lies behind a verse like the second verse here? What lies behind it? Well, clearly, first of all, these people perceived the blessing, the grace of God. They perceived the presence of God. They knew the immediate reality with God with them, Emmanuel, God with us! He is really with us. By the Holy Spirit, He is really living in us. They perceive then, the grace, the blessing of God. And they responded to it. And, of course, those are the brackets of our text today. What are the brackets? Well, “We want you to know, brothers,” verse one, “about the grace of God that’s been given among the churches of Macedonia...” What is verse nine? Paul says to the Corinthians, “For you know the grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ, that though He was rich,” that is, had all the glory of heaven, “yet for your sake He became poor...” He came here and took a body like ours and lived among us and died on a cross. “...for your sake he became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich.” So we are rich people – rich in His grace so it is all hinged, you see, and it all flows out of the grace of God given to us and the great privilege we have of responding to that grace in like manner by becoming gracious people, in particular in serving this city and this area, this state and this world, from where God has put us here, in this

magnificent tool of a building. So, the first movement is obvious, “First, they gave themselves.”

The second movement, I see, is *[that]* they became a changed people over there in Macedonia. They became a changed people. You could see the development of character. We see it, for example, in verse four. What kind of character do you see here? Paul says these people, these poor folks, had economically very little, these people were “begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in” this offering for Jerusalem. What? Most of us would have done what, crossed the street, gone to the other side, waited until next Sunday, or the Sunday after that? “Begging us for the favor?” Letting us give this love offering, this love offering, to the church in Jerusalem? They were begging us. What kind of people would do that? I can tell you what kind, folks. Folks like Christ, folks very much like God, folks who really understand the nature of a Christian response to the grace of Jesus. They were developing character – begging for the favor in taking part in an offering for the relief of the saints. They were alert to the need. They took the initiative and they followed through. Does that describe you and me? Does that describe Eagle Heights Presbyterian Church? Does that really describe us? Alert to the needs, taking the initiative, asking the favor of giving, and then following through.

I haven’t much time for this, but I often think of the story of Joseph, the man whose life and ministry dominates the last fourteen chapters of the book of Genesis. Think of that. That’s a chunk of the fifty chapters – from chapter 37 through chapter 50 – it’s Joseph, it’s Joseph, it’s Joseph. And why would I lift him up? Well, he was a product of a highly dysfunctional family, much like many families in the twenty-first century. And he was more than a bit of a brat, indulged by his father, spoiled by his dad, hated by his brothers. Eventually you find him, when he was seventeen years old in a big hole in Dothan, and his brothers debating about whether or not to kill him. They decided not to kill him. One brother, Reuben, was trying to save him. He was away from the crowd for a moment and they threw him in this deep hole, and from there sold him to some Midianites, or Ishmaelites actually, who came along, these *[Ishmaelite]* traders. And they sold their brother into slavery. And they took his lovely coat and tore it and besmeared it with the blood of animals and took it back to their old dad and said to him, “Dad, dad, we’re sorry about this, but an animal got Joseph. He’s no more.” And their old dad believed them. Seventeen years old in a hole in Dothan, sold to slave traders. Thirteen years later this man is the prime minister of Egypt, the mightiest nation on the face of the earth. What? Yes, Scripture tells us. Seventeen years of age in the hole in Dothan. When he began to serve Pharaoh in Egypt he was thirty. Endowed with incredible gifts from God, he was one of the best administrators in the history of the world. He spared not only Egypt from the severe famine, but his own family and many others in that part of the world in those days.

There is wisdom in storing things up to last through a severe drought and famine of great longevity. What about this Joseph? You see from the start that he comprehended God had delivered him for a purpose. So that the purpose of his life became that of service to God, who was his deliverer. But listen, it was not easy. He went from being a slave, traded off as one into the household of the captain of the guard of Pharaoh. Remember Potiphar? And this guy was so sharp that pretty soon he rose to be the head of the household. Potiphar didn’t have to worry about anything because Joseph took care of it. Then he resisted the seduction of

Potiphar's wife. She lied about him, got him into trouble. He was slammed in prison. And now, of course, there's no hope - he's in prison. Well, pretty soon the warden said, "You know, I can just take it easy, I've got a guy who can run the prison better than I can." So a prisoner ran the prison. Joseph ran the prison.

He met two guys, a chief baker and a chief cupbearer and they had a dream. He interpreted the dream, each of them, and one of them, the baker, the dream had not a good message, he said, "Pharaoh's going to lift up your head by chopping it off." Bad news. The other one, the cupbearer's, he said, "Pharaoh's going to lift up your head, but give you a blessing. You'll be restored to your former position only with more prestige and glory." Well, while they're in their cell, Joseph asked the chief cupbearer to Pharaoh, "Listen, this is going to happen. You'll be restored to your job and even better. You'll be given a raise. But will you remember me, please, and speak to Pharaoh?" Listen to this. Two years pass! And the guy said not a word to Pharaoh about Joseph who had given him deliverance. Well, can you imagine the frustration? Can you imagine the anger? Can you imagine the bitterness that a man would have to deal with in the circumstances in that? Can you even imagine that? Put yourself in that cell for two years more.

Of course God delivered him. The guy finally remembered after two years, "Oh, by the way, you're having a difficulty with dream interpretation. There's a guy over in the clinker here who can do it." So they brought Joseph out and he did it. And Pharaoh later said, "Who is among this kingdom, who is a man among us with God's spirit like this?" And the Scripture keeps telling us in all these incidents that God had given Joseph deliverance. And Joseph was responding, Joseph was growing in his confidence in God. That's how he dealt with anger and frustration and bitterness and suffering. That's how he did it. He was alert all through treachery and temptation and crushing disappointment and all the frustrations that went with that.

I'm intrigued with the names of the children. You look it up in chapter 41 of Genesis. I'm intrigued by this. When Joseph had his first two children they were sons. He named the first one Manasseh, which means "God has caused me to forget all my affliction." Do we ever need Manasseh in our hearts? We have long memories, don't we, of every hurt we've ever suffered. Don't we? The reason Joseph ministered so freely to God was Manasseh. He named his child that because God had enabled him to forget all that affliction. And he even goes on to say, "... and my father's house. My hateful brothers, my indulgent dad, all the rest of that. God has gotten me beyond that.

Have you trusted God that he's gotten you beyond all that? You go to Him every day and you dump it with Him and you leave it there? No, no, no. We dump it there and then go back and we pick it up and put it in the pack and walk off heavier than ever. Shame on us. The development of character has to do with this.

Well what about the other son? Ephraim, Ephraim. What in the world does that mean? God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction. What does that mean? God has used me in the toughest times of my life. Why was that? A character that's developed along the lines of God's own character will be sensitive, as we'll see in a moment, to everyone around him.

So there is the development of character. Those Macedonians had it, they really had it, and they found direction for their lives. Verse 5B, remember verse 5A is *[that]* they gave themselves to the Lord. Well what is the next movement here? And, by the will of God, they gave themselves to us. Paul says they gave themselves to us, by the will of God. Anytime you truly give yourself to Christ, you're going to give yourself to other people. It goes with that wonderful turf of His grace and His blessing and His love. When you give yourself fully to Him, you simply can't resist giving yourself fully to other people. Let's never ever forget that. By the will of God they gave themselves to us.

I think of Paul writing in Philippians chapter two verses 19, 20, 21, and 22. He writes about Timothy. He says about Timothy, who he's about to send over to Philippi, he says "I don't have anybody else like this guy." Why? Well, he goes on to explain why he has nobody else like Timothy, he said, "All the men around me think first of themselves and not of Christ. He thinks first of the cause of Christ. He thinks first of the Kingdom." And how does that work out? Well, Paul says in that passage the direction of his life is to other people. As we give ourselves first to the Lord, we give ourselves to this neighborhood, giving ourselves to this community, giving ourselves to this region. We're giving ourselves to this state. We're giving ourselves to this nation and world, aren't we? First, we give ourselves to the Lord, but then by His grace we do what Timothy did, we find that the new direction for our lives is other people - other needs than our own. So that God, the character, point two, is manifested in point three, which is this new direction for our lives.

Let's go back to Joseph one more time. How'd that work out for him? Well, in a ministry to slave traders, fellow captives, the warden, the captain of the guard, Pharaoh, the court, the nation, and his known world. *[The]* direction of his was outward. And I think about those wonderful chapters where in a process of his brothers coming for grain, for food, and telling him of Jacob, I think of the wonder of that story as it goes along. You need to go back and read that, and the essence of all that is, he is planning the deliverance of his family as well. The direction of his life is not to himself, it's not inward, it's outward, it's outward. We pray Eagle Heights will be characterized, even epitomized by outreach, outreach. God does the in-reaching, He then lays on us to do the outreach. God builds us up. God sends us out in the power of the spirit. Jesus commissions us, and we go forth to do His work.

In the Kirk of the Hills, from which place I came to here. I did an interim there of a year and a half. At every doorway, every exit way from the church they had inscribed above it, the doorway, "You are now entering the mission field." You're now entering the mission field. Outreach. These Macedonians had it. They were more concerned for the church in Jerusalem than for their own church. They found a new direction to their lives.

In the fourth place I mentioned they demonstrated their faith. There was something tangible that came out of this. Just do it! You know, is more than just an athletic shoe slogan. It has to do with the people of God being and doing what God has made us and called us to be and do in the world. Verse three is a very interesting summary, "...they gave according to their means, as I can testify." No, more, "they gave beyond their means of their own free will, begging us earnestly for the favor, taking part in this offering." So they did it first of all according to their means, but

secondly, beyond their means. And thirdly, of their own free will. God magnified their offering. And that's what's going on here. I've watched with great interest as Dave Lambert for the LBC, and then as the elders would speak, and the deacons would talk about the need for certain pleasures to undergird this, it turns out to be this, that they didn't need a campaign. I said to Pat, "This is a marvel of the Lord and Eagle Heights' congregation." They just announced it, and you gave. That's Macedonian stuff. That's Macedonian stuff, which must continue, by the grace of God, giving according to our means, no, more than that, beyond our means, and certainly doing it of our own free will, not because we were badgered to do it or give it, but God has called us to do it. God has called us to be givers, and we do it accordingly with His blessing to us.

And so then Paul, characteristically, goes to the Corinthians to ask them how well they understand or comprehend the lesson of the Macedonian churches, Thessalonica, Philippi, and Berea. Men and women, saying to them, "I want to know what sort of lesson you're learning from their example." So he says to these Corinthians in verses seven and eight, "As you excel in everything," they were a gifted bunch of people as well as pretty well-off financially, "But as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in our love for you..." Isn't that a blessing? "...see that you excel in this act of grace also." What is that? Learning to give yourselves and to give your money and your time, your energy, to give yourselves always to the work of Christ in this world. "Faith, speech, knowledge, and earnestness with love - you have all these things, you excel in these things, but you need to learn to excel in giving yourselves, first to the Lord, but then to the world around you. You need to excel in giving to the saints in Jerusalem, who are suffering so much now."

And then he uses an expression that I really think is a wonderful thing. As he talks about the... if we go beyond the verses of our text we'll see that there were certain benefits accruing to them as they did this. And their growth was going to be very plain to other people. But in verse eight is a great summary of all this. As they learned to give themselves and their worldly substance to the Lord and his work, he says, "I say this not as a command but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love is also genuine." Now I close there because, I think this is very crucial. We speak so much, don't we, of love. But when I say to you, "I love you," and then I almost never think about you or care about you or approach you or speak to you, that love is not genuine. "Let your love be genuine," that means that in the grace of Jesus Christ, remember the brackets of this passage? God has given His grace to Macedonia, they've used it, and now you Corinthians need to learn that grace, be taught by that grace, you need to understand how you respond, and you need to do it. And as you do it you will prove your love. You will show that your love is genuine. You will prove your love. It's more than words. It's more than intellectual comprehension of the Word of God, even. It is in the acts of mercy, in the deeds of kindness. It is a giving of yourself away with the Gospel. It is sharing the good news of Jesus with lost sinners. *[That]* they may know Him and come to love Him and join you in His service. Prove that your love is genuine.

What would happen if every husband, if every wife, if every child, if every grandchild would be about the business of Jesus Christ, of proving that our love is genuine? What would happen? I tell you, there'd be such an explosion of grace and love that we could hardly comprehend it. What would happen in Eagle Heights if

every single one of us, no matter *[the]* age or place in life, would be about proving the genuineness of our love for Christ and each other, what would happen? Well, it's beginning to happen. It is THE most wonderful thing that human beings can ever touch.

Way back there, when I first came as your interim pastor, I preached about building an oasis. You may not remember that. I won't try to re-preach that sermon, but I think what you're about is building an oasis, because Jesus is the water of life. And he said, "If you drink of this water..." That is, the love that He gives, the salvation that He brings, "If you drink of this water you won't ever thirst again." But he said, "You are the water. You carry, you are the bucket brigade, *[and]* you are carrying this water to the world." So we see that here will be the oasis of His love for everyone who comes through these doors. But there's more. This water is going to go out that door. And it's going to run through the streets, and it's going to run through the houses, and it's going to the businesses. We're proved by His grace that our love is genuine. Thanks be to God.

We come now, of course, to the approach *[of]* the Lord's Supper with great reverence and awe, deep appreciation of the cross of Christ. I'm going to take us this morning, for the words of institution, to the Gospel of Matthew, looking at just four verses in Matthew chapter twenty-six. The Lord institutes His supper in a fascinating setting or scenario. While He and his disciples are sitting at supper He announces Judas will betray Him, a terrible thing. You may have missed this, after he has had the supper with the disciples they sang a hymn as we will today, and they go out. And in their case they went out to the Mount of Olives. And it was on that particular walk that Jesus said, "You know, God has written that He will strike the shepherd and the sheep will run away." Peter said, "Never! I'll never run away from you, never deny you." And the Lord said, you remember, don't you, what He said, "This very night, before the cock crows, thrice. You will deny me thrice." Three times. But the text also says the others did the same. So sitting in the center of these two events, the betrayal of Judas and the denial of Peter and the others, Jesus institutes the Supper. Does that speak to you of grace? Does that speak to you of the undeserved love of God? Does that speak to you that Jesus did what no one could have done for us at that cross? From verse twenty-six, Matthew twenty-six and following:

Matthew 26:26-29

²⁶Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." ²⁷And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, ²⁸for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. ²⁹I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."

For which, we give thanks, great thanks, to the Lord. Let us pause now, to think for a moment about coming to the Supper, and what this really means. I want to invite you to come. Obviously the children who have not yet made a profession of faith will wait with us to see what it is that this means, and their parents later will instruct them further about that. It may also be that some of you here may not yet have come to Christ and that this will be a great lesson of His grace for you that in future

you may come to Him and celebrate the feast with us. But certainly the invitation is for you if you are a Christian. And here is how we fence the table here at Eagle Heights: we simply say as you come to worship God today with us, if you are one who believes in Jesus Christ personally, if you've surrendered your heart and your life to Him, if you have united yourself to some visible branch of His evangelical church in this world - doesn't have to be Presbyterian - but if that church preaches the gospel and believes it, and you're a member of that body, wherever it may be. If you're here and you stand in repentant faith before God today, then draw near and take this sacrament to your comfort and great blessing, through Jesus Christ who died for you.

Shall we stand to sing now, our hymn of approach to the table?