

“Money as never before.” 2 Corinthians 8:7-15

“But 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. I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich. And in this matter I give my judgment: this benefits you, who a year ago started not only to do this work but also to desire to do it. So now finish doing it as well, so that your readiness in desiring it may be matched by your completing it out of what you have. For if the readiness is there, it is acceptable according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have. For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of fairness your abundance at the present time should supply their need, so that their abundance may supply your need, that there may be fairness. As it is written, “Whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack.”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

When it happens, it usually comes with mixed emotions. Surprise, yes! Not necessarily a good one. Joy. Gratitude. Perhaps a bit of sadness and disappointment in myself. ‘What are you talking about, Pastor?’

About those moments, when the Word of God, when the Holy Spirit helps me to see that in some ways I have been shaped more by the world, than by the Word of God. Lately I have had a few such God given insights, and they all had to do with our – I should say my – Western individualistic thinking.

One of those recent insights was about money. Yes, money. How often have you heard me preach about money? When was the last time? Have you ever wondered why I don’t preach about it more often? For the Bible speaks about money a lot. A lot. Sure, from time to time I would bring up topics of giving and generosity, but for me it has always been quite difficult to preach about money. Uneasy. Why, I was wondering?

Yes, but how can you bring up such a personal matter? It is so important to us. So intimately related with our well-being, with our security, with our significance and status in society and in the Church. Me and my money. You and your money. These two seem almost inseparable.

How will that feel if such a personal matter is brought up publicly from the pulpit? So, better, let’s not talk about it. Let’s leave it to the Holy Spirit to work in our hearts and to guide us to do whatever He wants us to do with our money. That was my excuse.

And then it dawned on me. That is not a Christian attitude. That is not how the Spirit in the Scriptures speaks about money. Such a way of thinking is shaped not by the Word of God, but by the world, by our Western individualism. That’s it!

I am certainly grateful to the Lord for renewing one more facet of my thinking and bringing it in harmony with how the Word of God shows us those matters. And what do you think about

money? What do you think about giving? What place does it have in your relationships with the Triune God and with fellow Christians? Today's reading from 2 Corinthians is one of the many, many places in the Bible that helps us to learn how our God sees our giving.

Let's learn, shall we? **First**, what **Paul's message to Corinthians** is about, **second**, let's reflect a bit on what **our understanding and practice of giving** has been, and, **third**, let's learn **how to see our money and our giving the way the Holy Spirit shows it** to us.

First, what was Paul's message to Corinthians? Paul was writing to Corinthians to urge them to live up to what they had been planning anyway and to be generous in their giving to brothers and sisters who were in need.

Those Christians in Corinth evidently had been excited about the opportunity to support brothers and sisters in Jerusalem, as we too often can get excited about different opportunities, and similarly as we often fail to see things through, they too had not completed what they had hoped for.

What did Paul do? How did he urge them to be generous? What was his approach? And this is where we find how the Holy Spirit helps us to see giving from God's perspective. Not the way the world sees, but how our Lord sees it. Here it comes...

Our giving is God's gift to us. Yes! I will say it again. **Our giving is God's gift to us.** 'Pastor, but that doesn't make much sense.' Yes, but that's how the Lord sees our giving. Providing for us opportunities to give is nothing else than pouring His grace on us.

We usually think it is about us, about our generosity, about our good works, but no! It is about God's grace, about God's gift to us. Refusing to give, when God opens for us opportunities, is to refuse to receive God's gift of grace that would make us truly rich in good works, that would help us to store true treasures in heaven where we by no means will lose our reward. By refusing to give, we rob ourselves of God's grace.

By refusing to give we don't enrich ourselves, as we may quietly hope, instead, we impoverish ourselves, for we do not receive the riches of God's grace and joy that would last forever. And by giving we don't impoverish ourselves, as we may fear, but instead we enrich ourselves.

Our giving is God's gift to us. Paul explains it with the example of Macedonian Christians. They had been severely tested by afflictions. They had been made extremely poor. But despite that situation, they were overflowing with the Gospel joy and freedom, trusting their God.

They wanted more of God's grace. They insisted, they begged that they could participate in giving to the poor in Jerusalem. They were willing and ready to give not only according to their means, they gave far beyond their means.

In their joy and their experience of God's grace they gave like there was no tomorrow. Grateful that they were found worthy to participate in God's mission. They were like the poor widow in Luke 21, who gave her last two coins, all her life, everything that she had, freely entrusting herself to God's gracious care. As a living sacrifice.

This is what God's grace looks like. **Our giving is God's gift to us.**

Now, our second question. What is our understanding and practice of giving here in affluent Australia? Of course, we all are different, and there is no one answer that fits all. But I can tell you what I have witnessed in our Lutheran Church in my 10+ years in Australia.

Thanks be to God, I have been blessed to witness some incredibly generous fellow saints, they indeed have been receiving grace upon grace upon grace as they gave according to their means and sometimes beyond. Trusting their Lord, and He multiplied their joy.

But, on the other hand, it seems that often we have very different understanding and practice of giving. We have millions and millions of dollars in bank accounts, we have millions and millions of dollars in real estate. Some of that money congregations have earmarked for the mission, and now it lays there waiting, and waiting... for that mission to come.

It sometimes seems that our understanding is that to be faithful stewards of God's gifts we need to spend as little as we can, and to save as much as we can. So that our God doesn't run out of means. We will help. We will keep His money safe.

Otherwise... What could He do without us? One day with His extravagant generosity He just may go bankrupt. That's how it sometimes looks like. Or are we deceiving ourselves? Are we actually saving for something else? Just to be safe, if something happens...

There are more and more congregations in our LCA as well where a handful of people keep meeting in their church buildings, when a few minutes along the way there is the next church, and the next. When asked why they do not join with fellow saints a few minutes along the road, the popular answer is – for the sake of the mission! And when asked what mission exactly do they have in mind, often there is no answer.

Some of you may remember Nepalese Pastor Rabindra Das, who visited us last year. He came from the country where Christians are persecuted, and where the Church is growing by more than 10% per year. There is a season of God's grace there, where the Gospel spreads like fire. That is a very poor country and one of their challenges is to find a place where to gather together. Pastor Rabindra had this vision "church-to-church".

What was that about? Seeing how many congregations are shrinking, closing and selling their properties, he envisioned that the means gained by selling a church in Australia could be used to build new churches in Nepal. Just to give you an idea of what it may look like; if one of our church buildings were used for such a purpose, that would enable the building of probably a good 30 churches in Nepal. A place for 30 new and growing congregations.

Wouldn't that be God's grace bestowed upon us if we were able to do something like that? What else would you call it? What a blessing it would be and how much joy it would bring to the body of Christ, to them and to us?! **Our giving is God's gift to us.**

Finally, our third topic. **Let's learn how to see our money and our giving the way the Holy Spirit shows it to us.** Let's see how we too could become more like those Macedonians. What would enable us to receive so much of God's grace? We could summarize it in four points.

First. The Gospel. Yes! When we meet the Triune God, we learn that it is Him who has given us everything. Heavens and earth are His. As our Creator He has given us everything we have

and everything we are; body and soul, house and home, family and friends and everything needed for this life. He gives it to us! We are free to trust in His provision. More than that, He has given us not the first fruits of His creation, not the firstborns of His flocks, He has given us... His Only-Begotten Son so that we may have life, true life.

The Son of God has given His life for us, there is no greater love; He became poor, leaving divine glory, emptying Himself, so that He could make us rich as heirs of God's eternal Kingdom. He did all of this for you!

Second. More Gospel. Yes! The Triune God has blessed us with His forgiveness. But He wants to keep pouring His grace upon us, as He shapes us to be more and more like His Son Jesus Christ. And one of the ways He does that is by providing for us more opportunities to give. For "it is more blessed to give than to receive." It is our giving that gives us more joy. The more we can give, freely and trusting in our God, the more we are filled with divine joy.

Third. Our response. When we receive God's grace, we want to respond to it, we want to thank our gracious God, to please Him, serve Him. How to do that, as He doesn't need anything from us? The answer is – when we love one another as Jesus has loved us. That's how.

This is how the world recognizes Jesus' disciples, when we love one another as Jesus loved us. Also, in our giving. That is how we can show how different we are. How free and generous in our giving. A family analogy is helpful. What do we do in our families, when someone is in need? When someone requires more support? We love them, we help them, we give them.

We don't count how much, for what we want to give is our love. Not money, money may simply be a means that expresses our love. How much do we want to give to those we love the most? You know the answer. As much as possible, ourselves and everything we have, just to express our love. We don't count how much we give; it doesn't matter when we love others.

You have been made members of Jesus' family. God the Father is your Father in heaven. His saints around the world are your true brothers and sisters. They are your family. One day you will see them all. Their needs are our opportunities to receive more of God's grace by giving them what He has given us. Our giving is God's gift to us. It is. We are free to receive it.

Finally, fourth. Paul adds one more principle. Our God doesn't count how much you have given, He does not look at the numbers, instead, He looks at the willingness of our hearts. Some may have much and give little, and they receive little grace. Some may give according to their means, or even beyond, they receive much grace. Some may be longing to give, but have nothing to give. That's okay as they are in no way excluded from God's grace, for He sees our hearts. Willingness and readiness to give according to what we have is all that matters.

That's it. These are a few things we can learn from Paul's letter to Corinthians. I pray that the same Spirit who made Macedonians generous and joyful beyond measure, fills our hearts also, so that we too may rejoice in God's grace as we give according to our means.

Our giving is God's gift to us. Receive it, rejoice in it!

Amen.