

“Proving Joy”

1 Chronicles 29:9-18 • 2 Corinthians 8:1-15

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

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I think one of the most difficult subjects to talk about in church is probably money. We don't mind talking about money abstractly. And most of us don't even mind talking about other people's money. But when the subject turns to our own money we start to get a little uncomfortable. Probably because we think someone is then going to try to get some of it from us.

The truth is that money is a very personal subject. The reason is because money represents value. It represents the value of goods and services we can buy with it. But it also represents the value of our time and expertise and hard work that we traded for that money. The problem is that many of us start to see money as representing our own value. Maybe that's why the gospels record Jesus talking about money more than any other subject. Did you know that? Jesus talked more about money than he did about heaven or hell or even love. Since Jesus thought it was important to talk so much about money, maybe we should spend some time talking about it as well.

This morning we return to our study of 2 Corinthians that we started last fall. The letter began with Paul defending his ministry against some people who were accusing him falsely of trying to take advantage of the Corinthians. They said he couldn't possibly be a real apostle because he didn't appear successful – he didn't have a lot of money or drive a fancy car. In fact, instead he was frequently beaten and chased out of town. Paul reminds us that in God's Kingdom things are usually the opposite of the way of the world.

He then presents such wonderful, deep theology. In Chapter 4 he shows us that we can know God because God reveals himself to us. Paul writes, “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to

us.” And 2 Corinthians 5:17 is one of the most memorable verses in the Bible: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.”

We need to remember, though, that for the Apostle Paul, theology is always practical. It applies to your life today. And so now in 2 Corinthians 8 he shows how it applies to the Corinthians and how it applies to us, and it has to do with money. Paul had been coordinating a collection from the churches he had started to help the Christians in Jerusalem who were suffering. A year before writing 2 Corinthians, Paul had instructed the church in Corinth to take up an offering each week to go to Jerusalem. We find these instructions in 1 Corinthians 16 and apparently the church had begun to take up the offering. But over time, and especially during the conflict with Paul's accusers, they had stopped. So now Paul is encouraging them to complete the collection, not because he tells them to but to prove that their relationship with Jesus is genuine.

To help us understand what we're talking about let's consider the story of Zacchaeus. Luke 19 begins by telling us three basic facts about Zacchaeus. First, he was a chief tax collector. That means he had partnered with the occupying Romans for profit. Tax collectors were not liked at all, primarily because they defrauded people for personal gain, which leads us to the second thing Luke tells us about Zacchaeus – he was rich. The third thing we're told, which is what most people remember about him, is that he was short. I'm sure you know the story. Zacchaeus heard that Jesus was coming and he wanted to see what the big deal was but he couldn't see over the crowd. So he climbed a tree to get a better look at Jesus. When Jesus comes by he stops and tells Zacchaeus to come down from the tree because he needs to stay at his house.

When Zacchaeus meets Jesus his whole life changes. What he's passionate about changes. What's the proof? His attitude toward money changes. He tells Jesus, "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold." Before meeting Jesus, Zacchaeus had a passion for getting money. It was the main focus of his life. Now he has a passion for giving. A saving relationship with Jesus does the same for us, too. As Kent Hughes says in his commentary on 2 Corinthians, "authentic salvation changes our orientation to wealth. If our professed salvation has not loosed our grip on material things so that we have become giving people, we are not saved, despite our protestations."

Paul uses two examples to encourage the Corinthians to give. One is an example of poverty and the other an example of wealth. He begins with the Macedonian Christians. These were people who were extremely poor. They suffered from extreme poverty and affliction. But they had come to know Jesus and it changed everything. Even as they experienced so much suffering they had an abundance of joy. Verse 2 says, "in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part." Paul didn't expect them to be able to give but they begged him to let them participate. Giving back to God gave them tremendous joy. How? They had discovered what King David said in our reading from First Chronicles – it all belongs to God. They recognized that everything they had, even though it wasn't much, had come from God. In 1 Chronicles 29:14, when the people had giving generously to help build the Temple, King David asks, "who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able thus to offer willingly?" But then he answers his own question and the answer is quite simple. He says, "all things come from you, and of your own have we given you." Then he adds, "all this abundance that we have provided

for building you a house for your holy name comes from your hand and is all your own."

The second example Paul gives is Jesus himself. He writes, "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." Jesus willingly surrendered the riches of heaven to become one of us so that we would be with him forever. According to Paul, this is how Jesus proved his love for us. We find the same thing in 1 John 3:16 which says, "By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers." You and I prove our love for Jesus by sacrificing for our fellow believers. That includes our time and our money.

Next week when we look at chapter 9 we will talk more about what God expects from us in our giving, but for now Paul tells us that our giving is how we prove our love for God. It's how we prove our joy that comes from his salvation. He says that if we have truly been transformed by the love of Christ we will have a desire to give generously and we will also follow through with giving.

This week you will be receiving a letter in the mail encouraging you to make a commitment to your church. We ask that you would commit to pray regularly for your church, that you would serve somewhere in the life of the church and also serve with us in our community, and that you would commit to give to God's work through this congregation. I would love for you to bring those cards with you next Sunday and place them in the offering plate. But I want to make sure you understand this – it's not about a certain dollar amount. God doesn't need your money. It's about your heart. What God wants is for you to give in proportion to what He has given you. As verse 12 says, "if the readiness is there, it is acceptable according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have." As you think about completing a commitment card, don't think in terms of a certain dollar amount

but think about a percentage of your income. The dollar amount is only to help the elders with budgeting and they won't know what your particular dollar amount is. Neither will I. Most of you know that my policy is to not know how much anyone gives to the church. I do know who completes a card but your giving is a faith issue and so it's between you and God.

My prayer for each of you is that by giving to God you will experience the grace of God that leads to an abundance of joy.

Amen.