

“We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints—and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us. Accordingly, we urged Titus that as he had started, so he should complete among you this act of grace. 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.”

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

I am sure that in another sermon I have told you about comedian Flip Wilson's impression of the Rev. Leroy. Rev. Leroy came to church one Sunday morning and started to preach. Brothers and sisters! God has been blessing this church and helping it to grow - and this church is gonna start to crawl. And the congregation responded, Let it crawl Reverend, let it crawl. And when this church is done crawling, it is going to stand up and walk! Let it walk, Rev, let it walk. And brothers and sisters, once this church starts to walk it is going to learn to run! Let it run, Reverend, let it run. But, brothers and sisters, for this church to run, it is going to take money! Let it crawl, Reverend, let it crawl.

While we can easily see the humour in a story like this, it is not as funny to realize that quite often that is the way we, as Christians really are. We are good at talking about all we want the church—our church—to be. We know what we want to do. But are we willing to help in the work and contribute to the cost of that work? Are we willing to give of ourselves to see the church at its best? That is what we see in the Macedonian church which Paul speaks of in our text today. This church is the finest example of a giving church in Scripture. Paul tells us about the generosity of these people in giving to the church and its programs. In fact he tells us: *For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints.* These people didn't want the church to crawl; they wanted to see it run and they were willing to put their money where their mouths were. But it is not the money they gave that sets them apart as a giving church. Rather it is something else Paul says in our text: *but they gave themselves first to the Lord.* It was that selfless surrender of themselves for the sake of the Lord that makes them a truly giving church.

There is no denying that the church at its best must be a giving church. We cannot survive as a congregation, or work or reach out to the world, without the financial gifts and support of the people of our congregation. We could not accomplish the things we do if it were not for the faithfulness of people like our Sunday School teachers, our Elders and council members, our musicians and all those who serve here, giving of their time for the sake of the church. But the church is at it's best when we, like those Christians in Macedonia, first give ourselves to the Lord and surrender our whole heart and life to Him, letting Him use us to accomplish great and wonderful things to the glory of His name.

In the church at Macedonia, we see just what can happen when people do give themselves totally to God. It is also surprising that this particular church is best known as a giving church. In our text, Paul is writing to the Corinthian church regarding a collection that was being taken to help the church in Jerusalem during a severe famine in Judea. While the relatively affluent Corinthians had started to take up a collection for a relief effort, their efforts had slowed down or stopped. To encourage them, Paul holds up the example of the Macedonians. The irony is that the Macedonian church was not a wealthy church. Paul mentions their extreme poverty in our text. They were dealing with some difficult times, for Paul refers to their severe trials. Their economic situation wasn't much different than what we feel we are experiencing in Calgary today. Yet these Gentile Christians gave generously to help the Jewish believers in Christ. Paul says they gave what they were able to give, and even more than they were able to give. They did it joyfully and gladly. Our text tells us that they even pleaded for an opportunity to help their fellow Christians in this way. They did not say, “We'd like to help, but we are having a bit of a time making a go of it ourselves right now.” They didn't focus on their own problems. If anything, they simply saw that they had been blessed by God, and where blessings abound, faithful hearts want to do what they can for the good of the whole church.

Surely, Paul would have understood if they had only sent a small offering to Jerusalem. He would have understood that circumstances kept them from doing more. Paul probably did not expect that much from this church. That is why our text tells us that Paul was surprised at the response: surprised, until he began to understand why these people acted the way they did.

They gave to this offering, because they first and foremost had given themselves and all that they had, to the Lord for Him to use as He saw best.

They gave themselves first to the Lord. To the Macedonians this was the natural thing to do. What else could they do? Had not that same Lord given Himself for them? Paul says: ***“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.”*** (2 Corinthians 8:9, ESV) These people knew what God had done for them. Jesus didn't have to come to save them or us, but He did. He didn't have to die for our sins, but He did. He didn't have to make us the children of God, but He did. The Macedonians knew this and believed it with all their hearts. They had experienced His grace in their lives. They knew that even though they were insignificant people—just poor, miserable sinners—that Christ loved them with the greatest of loves. He had blessed them so richly in giving Himself for them. They knew that the selfless sacrifice of Jesus on the cross was for them and for their salvation. They knew that Jesus rose that they would someday know the joy of eternal life in heaven. They had been blessed in so many ways, with the kind of blessing that Jesus speaks about in our Gospel lesson today. Jesus did it all! He saved us from death's terror. He saves us from hell's torment. He saves us from empty and meaningless lives. He blesses us with a wonderful, new life, a rich, abundant life with Him, that lasts for all eternity.

The Macedonian Christians believed this. They knew that they were the children of God and that there was nothing more that they could have, need or want. They were blessed, and in that blessedness they gave themselves to the Lord. They didn't just sing, *Take my life and let it be, consecrated Lord, to Thee* (LSB 783, st. 1). They lived it! That was why they were more than ready to surrender all their possession to God, to use as He saw fit. It was His, anyway. He had first given it to them. They were blessed, and they let those blessings flow out from them to be a blessing to others.

God has blessed us just as richly as the Macedonian Christians, and even more so. We are troubled by the difficult economic situation right now. We look at a world that has its wars and tensions. We see the sorrow, the disease, the suffering that goes on around us. But we know that God is still at work in us and around us. We see His miracles in the simple blessings of each day. We also see the overall abundance that He has given us. Maybe we don't have everything we want, but most of us have to admit that we have all that we need—and then some. Best of all, we have His love for us; His forgiving love that takes away our sins and brings us into His family. And because He loves us, we share in all the blessings of His kingdom. But what do we do with all that God has given to us? Let's never forget that we are nothing and we have nothing if it does not first come from Him. Do we keep it totally to ourselves, or do we give it back to Him, knowing that He can do more with it than we can?

The Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea are just a short distance from each other and are fed by the same stream of water. But they are as different as night and day. Galilee is alive and fresh; its waters are sweet and a home for fish and commerce. Vegetation grows along its shores. It gives as much as it receives and seems happy in the giving. The waters of the Jordan flow into it, and it generously sends them on their way again southward to the other sea - the Dead Sea. This body of water lies in a sunken valley, dead and still. There is no life in its salty waters; no vegetation carpets its shores. It swallows up all the water brought into it, without sending it off again - and so it remains what it has been for centuries, a lifeless, barren, watery waste.

That is what we are when we keep God's blessings to us all to ourselves. We become barren and dead, missing out on the real joy of life, which comes from a heart first given to the Lord. God does—and will bless us. Where His blessings abound, we let those blessings flow through us to do God's work, to accomplish His plans. We struggled to set our budget this year and we worry and wonder how we are going to get the money to meet the budget. The answer is easy: the Lord will provide, but He does it through you—through the faithfulness of people who first give themselves to Him, and who then give as He has blessed them. We look at the whole host of things that we want and need to do as a church. How will we ever manage it? It will happen easily if we first give ourselves to the Lord to serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness. We can be sure of the greatest possible return on this investment of ourselves, because whatever we give to the Lord will be multiplied and returned to us again. It is not a loss to give ourselves to the Lord; rather, it is pure gain. Jesus said: ***“For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it.”*** (Mark 8:35, ESV)

There is an old hymn that has Jesus reminding us: *“I gave My life for thee, My precious blood I shed, That thou might'st ransomed be And quickened from the dead. I gave My life for thee; What hast thou given for Me?”* (TLH 405, st. 1) In answer to that question, the Macedonian Christians gave themselves to the Lord. May that be our joy, too, that we surrender all to the Lord. God doesn't want, need or even ask for all your money. He does ask for your heart—the heart that worships and grows in His grace; the heart that sees the challenges that we face, and which responds to meet those challenges in His grace. The wonderful reality is that what we give to Him will always come back in abundance, with the hope, the joy and the life that flows from His grace. Amen.