

June 30, 2023
Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
St. Timothy Lutheran Church – Huber Heights, OH
Pastor Joel Sutton

2 Corinthians 8:1–9, 13–15

BY JESUS' POVERTY, YOU ARE RICH

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

In June 2014, an unremarkable man in Vermont, 92-year-old Ronald Read, passed away. He came from humble beginnings. Like my own dad, Ronald was the first in his family to graduate from high school and fought for his country during World War II. After the war, he was married, found a job at a gas station, and later worked as a janitor at JC Penney. He remained a frugal and hard worker his entire life, pinching pennies and cutting his own firewood until the age of 90. Perhaps we'd even call him *stingy*, as he'd park far down the street, so he didn't have to put his coins in a parking meter.

His friends and acquaintances thought him to be *poor* so they would do little things for him to help him out. But unbeknownst to everyone, the pennies he had been pinching – he was investing. The man *they thought* was living in *poverty*, thanks to *frugal* spending and *generous* investing, at his death, had amassed an \$8 million fortune. Six million dollars, he bequeathed to his local library and hospital.

<https://www.cnbc.com/2015/02/06/janitor-bequeaths-millions-to-library-hospital.html>

<https://www.boston25news.com/news/trending-now/who-was-ronald-read-the-janitor-who-amassed-an-8-million-fortune-and-gave-it-all-away/435043375/>

What does it mean to be *rich*? And what does it mean to be *poor*? In our society we compare ourselves to others by measuring our money and possessions. Those who earn and possess the most, we call *rich*. Those who earn and possess the least, we call *poor*. But is that the most accurate way to determine who is *rich* and *poor*? Some who possess *much* don't consider themselves *rich*, and because they want more and more, they're not *generous* toward others. And some who possess very *little* don't think of themselves as *poor*, because they're satisfied and content with what they have, while at the same time, are very *generous* toward others.

In our Epistle reading for today, St. Paul is encouraging the Christians in Corinth toward *generosity*. In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul has been exhorting and encouraging the Corinthians to live as God's redeemed children for the sake of Christ; to live as new creations in Christ, faithfully clinging to their forgiveness of sins, life, and eternal salvation. All of God's wrath against their sin, your sin, and the whole world's sin, has been completely atoned for and satisfied through Christ's sacrificial death on the cross. You and all who respond in simple faith and trust, without any special claim or merit of your own, are declared justified by God – that is – you are pronounced not guilty by God's judicial authority – just as if you never sinned.

So Paul implores the Corinthians , and he implores you, on behalf of Christ, to be reconciled to God. (cf: 2 Corinthians 5:11–21) Be reconciled – meaning – receive God’s precious gifts in faith. God in Christ has already done all the work. He has reconciled you to Himself and made peace by Christ’s blood shed on the cross. You and I merely receive the **riches** of Christ’s gifts. In Baptism, God has given you His gifts of forgiveness, faith, and the Holy Spirit. Faith then, receives and trusts in Christ’s work of salvation, and works and deeds flow from faith. Unbelief, however, rejects it.

In our today’s text, Paul turns his attention to Christian **generosity** and tending to the needs of others. Through war, famine, and persecution, the Christians in and around Jerusalem at that time had become **poor**. In his first letter to the Corinthians Paul had urged them, just as he had urged the churches in Galatia and Macedonia, out of love for their fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, to take up a collection for the saints by setting something aside on the first day of every week, so it could be carried to Jerusalem for the relief of fellow Christians. (1 Corinthians 16:1–4)

The collection in Corinth wasn’t progressing as Paul had hoped, so here in his second letter, he urges them to excel in **generosity** in the relief and support of the saints in Jerusalem. He doesn’t beat them down with the Law to accuse them of not doing enough, but holds up before them other churches as an example of the work of God’s grace, a work of God’s grace for which all Christians and all Christian congregations should seek out in prayer, word, and deed. Paul writes:

“We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, ² 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. ³ For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, ⁴ begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints.” (2 Corinthians 8:1–4)

The grace of God that was given to the Macedonians included the grace of giving. At that time, the churches in Macedonia had no wealth. Her members had suffered violent persecution at the hands of the Romans and were left in **poverty**. (cf 1Thessalonians 1:6; 2:14) Yet, Paul says that even from the depths of their **poverty**, not out of coercion or compulsion, they overflowed in a **wealth** of **generosity** toward others in need.

The Corinthian Church was far wealthier by earthly standards than the Macedonians. When Paul saw the Macedonians were so **generous** in their **poverty**, he sent Titus to the Corinthians so that, just as the Macedonians had, they too, could know the joy of bestowing of God’s unmerited **grace** through the Word and ministry provided through their collection for the saints. Paul doesn’t outright command and demand how much they should give – but he appeals to them that as they excel in everything else, faith, speech, and knowledge, to excel in this **generous** act of grace. (cf: 2 Corinthians 8:6–7)

Just as we consider the opposite of **rich** to be **poor**, the opposite of **generosity** is **selfishness** or **stinginess**. Like **rich** and **poor**, **generosity** and **selfish stinginess** are not necessarily determined by how much material wealth one has. **Generosity** is a matter of the heart, a matter of trust, a matter of faith. Paul sees in the Corinthians a danger that their hearts will be **stingy** toward those

in need. So, he seeks to open their hearts to trust in God *more*, and trust in their earthly wealth *less*; to trust in their Lord *more*, and trust in their bank accounts *less*.

Throughout history and even today, some people are like the Macedonians. They want to give. They want to help. They can't be held back from their *generosity*. Some people are the opposite of the Macedonians. They're *stingy* penny pinchers. They are so miserly *selfish* that they can't be persuaded for a penny's worth of *generosity* toward others despite being abundantly *wealthy* themselves.

But the reality is – most of us are somewhere in between the two extremes. It seems the Corinthians were. And perhaps so are you. Maybe you wish you could increase your giving to the church, but when the opportunity comes, like when you get a raise or a nice tax refund, your mind gets distracted; you spend it on remodeling the house, or a new or fancier car, or a nice vacation.

Don't get me wrong. There's nothing wrong with these things. They're blessings from God. But many times, out of selfish ambition or conceit, you and I serve our own desires first before we look to the needs of others. (cf: Philippians 2:3–4) When sin entered the world, the hearts of all mankind were corrupted. Martin Luther describes the sinful nature of man as being: "*curved in on oneself*." (LW 25, 294) It's what sin does. It curves us in on ourselves. It's what Paul saw in the Corinthians and he's doing everything he can to bend them away from themselves and toward their neighbors.

In our text, Paul isn't giving a command. He doesn't describe *generosity* and giving to the church as a Law to *accuse* you of sin, but as a joy that you are *free* to do. Giving *generously* isn't something you *have* to do, but something you *get* to do. It's something you were created to do. (cf: Ephesians 2:10)

Good works, *generosity*, and coming to the aid of your brother in need are fruits of faith. They are neither the cause of your salvation nor add to your salvation. God in Christ has already done all the work. Your good works are a *result* of your salvation. Like the Macedonians, your works are works of God's grace, working through you for the good of others. They happen spontaneously and flow from faith. You love and serve Christ by loving and serving your neighbor. (cf: Matthew 25:35–4)

This doesn't mean that it's always easy. But thanks be to God, in Christ Jesus, we have both an example to follow and a Redeemer to save us from our sins of selfishness and stinginess. As Paul writes in our text this morning:

"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)

Jesus left the *riches* and glories of heaven to come down to earth to save you. He emptied Himself and took on human flesh and form. He didn't live in splendor and majesty on earth. He didn't overthrow Rome and take over Caesar's palace. Jesus had no place to lay his head. He wandered from town to town relying on the *generosity* of others.

And if that wasn't humiliating enough, He humbled and emptied Himself further by willingly being handed over to sinful men who beat and bloodied Him, mocked and spit on Him, and put Him to death on the cross. Even though He had the power to stop it and escape it. Like a lamb led to slaughter, He willingly went to the cross, stripped and bleeding, to die a criminal's death He didn't deserve. By Jesus' *poverty* you are made *rich*. By His wounds you have been healed. (cf: 1 Peter 2:24–25) By His blood, you have peace with the Father. By His death, you have been given eternal life.

This *generous* Jesus suffered the *poverty* of being forsaken by His heavenly Father so that you might enjoy the immeasurable *riches* of His Father's grace. In the depth of His *poverty* on the cross, Jesus purchased and won you from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with His holy, precious blood, and with His innocent suffering and death. (cf: 1 Peter 1:18–19)

As His baptized and redeemed child, you now are free live under Him in His kingdom, serving Him in the everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness that He has given to you – just as you are now free to give *generously* in serving and loving your neighbor. Giving *generously* isn't something you *have* to do, but something you *get* to do. It's something you were created to do.

If you are like the *generous* Macedonians, thanks be to God! But, if like the Corinthians, perhaps you have been less than *generous* in the past. *Generosity* is a matter of faith and trust in Christ. Bending away from one's self and toward others requires sacrifice. It requires denying oneself. You may struggle to trust that God will find a way to care for you as you increase your *generosity*, but regardless of how much money you have in the bank or how big your paycheck is, you are *rich* beyond measure. For you have been given the *riches* of Jesus' death and resurrection for you and your salvation. That is the only measurement of *riches* that matters – the *riches* of Christ for you. Amen.

Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understand, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus,
Amen.