

LIVING WITH A GENUINE EXCELLENT SPIRIT
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We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints— and this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us, so that we might urge Titus that, as he had already made a beginning, so he should also complete this generous undertaking among you. Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking. I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. And in this matter I am giving my advice: it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something— now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means. For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have. I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. As it is written, ‘The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little.’

2 Corinthians 8:1-15

Corinth was a major port city. It was a diverse city. It was a multi-cultural city. It was a city with significant wealth. Within this city the apostle Paul had planted a new church, and this new church had established one of its ministries to be the collection of a financial gift for Christians with need in Jerusalem (1 Corinthians 16:1-4).

But there was a problem. Even though the Corinthian church had made a goal of giving to Christians with need and even though there was wealth among their membership, the church had not gotten around to completing their goal. In response to this the apostle Paul addresses the issue of giving in his second letter to the church. First, Paul begins in verses 1 and 2 by comparing the wealthier Corinthian church to the lower income churches in Macedonia. He writes:

We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy, and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.

Paul is pointing out that even though the lower income, Macedonian churches are filled with poverty and affliction; they are generously involved with the ministry of giving. In saying this he is trying to inspire the wealthier Corinthian church to a higher level of generosity.

This is kind of like when I was a 10 year old boy. I was a pretty fast runner, or at least I thought I was. Then one day at a family reunion my 70 year old uncle challenged me to a foot race in the back yard, and to my surprise he beat me! I couldn't believe it! My uncle laughed and laughed, and said to me, "You didn't think an old guy like me could run that fast did you?" Amazed I didn't really say anything, but deep down inside I was compelled to want to race him again because I knew I could run faster. In the same way the Apostle Paul's words are meant to inspire the Corinthian church by showing them that churches who appear to be less capable of generosity are giving much more than they are.

After attempting to inspire the wealthier Corinthian church by the generosity of those with less, Paul teaches the Corinthian church about a virtue that is so important in our Christian faith. It is the virtue of excellence. He writes in verse 7:

Now as you excel in everything – in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you – so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking.

Dictionary.com defines the word excel as "to do extremely well". When you stop and think about Jesus Christ, his life, his ministry, and his death and resurrection, nothing about our Lord is mediocre. Excellence is a virtue that characterized everything he said and did. He cleansed lepers. He fed the hungry. He clothed the naked. He spoke as one having authority from heaven. He healed the sick, forgave sinners, and welcomed those who were excluded by society. As people watched his ministry they were continually amazed and filled with awe, and to summarize his actions and spirit by which he carried out his ministry, they said, "He has done everything well (Mark 7:37)." Jesus Christ truly was a man with the virtue of excellence, and he commissioned his disciples and gave us the grace of the Holy Spirit so we may live our lives with the same virtue of excellence.

As a messenger and leader in Christ's church Paul upholds the same virtue of excellence for the Christians in Corinth. He admonishes them to excel in their faith, to excel in the words they speak to one another, and to excel in their knowledge of the Lord. But again Paul comes back to the ministry of financial giving. In the same way he exhorts the Corinthian church to excel in all areas of life, he encourages them to have the same Christian virtue of excellence in how they give.

Next, Paul continues his instruction to the Corinthian church about giving by talking about the importance of genuine love. He writes in verse 8:

I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others.

In addition to showing the Corinthian church that they could give more and in addition to preaching to them about the virtue of excellence, Paul reminds the Corinthian church of the greatest virtue of all in giving. It is the virtue of love, because giving without love is empty and meaningless.

Popular preacher, Rob Bell, points out this truth in his Nooma video entitled “Sunday”. He describes a time when he brought a bouquet of flowers to his wife, and he describes what it would be like if after giving the flowers to his wife he said, “I’m your husband. It was my duty. There was a sale, and they were cheap. I figured you needed them.” Bell raises the question, “Does she even want the gift of the flowers?” No, what his wife really wanted was her husband’s heart and his love. In the same way, God doesn’t want our money if it doesn’t come from a genuine expression of love from our hearts. God wants our hearts to be genuine when we give.

Finally, in his instructions on giving Paul invites the Corinthian church to remember Jesus as our example of what authentic giving looks like. Real giving is sacrificial, and it is generous. Paul writes in verse 9:

For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.

Jesus was one who emptied himself of his divinity, and took on human form. He was one who lived for the will of God, and he became obedient to the point of death on the cross. Through his sacrificial living and through the generous giving of himself, billions throughout generations have received the gift of the forgiveness of sins, the gift of the Holy Spirit, the gift of the community of the church, and the gift of eternal life. Paul is right in saying that we have truly become rich because of Jesus. In response to this kind of generosity, how can we, his followers, not respond with the same level of sacrifice and generosity?

As I close today, we have a modern day story that illustrates for us all of these truths that Paul writes about. It is the story of George Bailey from the movie “It’s a Wonderful Life”. George was a man who had all kinds of ambitions and dreams. He wanted to travel the world, but in his life he sacrificed his dreams to make others rich. He took over his father’s Bailey Savings and Loan. He stayed in Bedford Falls, and he lived out the virtues that Paul writes about. He lived with excellence instead of mediocrity. He lived with genuine love for others, and he sacrificially gave so many others could simply live. At the end of the story George Bailey has great financial need. Let’s look at what happens to George Bailey.

(Play the video clip of the closing scene of “It’s a Wonderful Life”).

This movie shows us what a wonderful life is all about. It is about living with a genuine and excellent spirit. It is about generously loving and giving to others. It is about giving back to the one who has given so much to us. Today, we have the opportunity to give back to the One who became poor so we could be rich – rich in the forgiveness of our sins, rich in the promise of eternal life in heaven, rich in the gift of the Holy Spirit, rich in the gift of the worshiping community of our church. May the Lord grant each of us grace as we give, so that we may each discover how wonderful life is when we follow Jesus Christ, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.