

“Empowered by Grace to Give”

2 Cor. 8:1-9, Stewardship Sermon 2, Nov. 8, 2015

It certainly is a constant theme of the Apostle Paul all throughout his New Testament writings—that any of us who are the followers of Jesus Christ—are only empowered to carry out effective ministries in this world by the grace of God.

Certainly St. Paul makes this abundantly clear to us in 2 Cor. 3, where he writes: *“We are not sufficient to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency alone comes from God, who by his grace makes us competent to be ministers of the New Covenant, not of the letter of the Law that kills, but of the Spirit. For the letter kills but the Spirit gives life!”*

Over and over again, Paul reiterates this same theme with respect to his own life and ministry. In I Cor. 15 Paul says, *“I am the very least of all the apostles not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God, but by the grace of God I am what I am and his grace to me was not in vain! On the contrary I worked harder than any of them; but it was not me, it was the grace of God with me!”*

Well immediately after his dramatic conversion to the Christian faith there on the Road to Damascus (Acts 9), Paul spent the next three years, we learn from Galatians 2, living in Arabia, where he spend much time there in prayer rethinking under the direction of the Holy Spirit his whole theology.

After that period of three years, he then made a trip to Jerusalem where he met with the Apostle Peter, and also he tells us in Galatians 2 with the Apostle John. There it was a mutual decision among them that Paul would direct his ministry primarily to the Gentiles (all of the people in the world at that time who were not Jewish), while Peter and the others would continue to share the Gospel primarily with their fellow Jews.

Paul became convinced that this was God’s will for his life. In Ephesians 3 Paul writes: *“Of this Gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God’s grace which he has given me by the working of his power. To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages—that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers together with us of the same promise of eternal life in Christ Jesus through the Gospel!” (Ephesians 3:7-9, 3-6).*

So Paul went out on his first missionary journey, preaching the Gospel to all who would listen, beginning new Christian congregations everywhere he could.

Fourteen years later, he and Titus made another trip to Jerusalem where he met with the Apostle Peter and some of the other apostles again. And there these men put a big question before Paul, asking him to take up a collection from all of the Gentile congregations; from those who had been founded by him and those who had been founded by his coworkers as well, for the saints in Jerusalem.

Why? Because the Christians in Jerusalem were undergoing a great difficulty at that time, not only being persecuted by the Jewish religious authorities, but by many of their own relatives who had not become Christians. In addition to this there had been a terrible drought going on in all of the regions surrounding Jerusalem, so that the people there were experiencing a terrible famine.

St. Paul accepted the challenge and by the grace of God so many of the Christian congregations made up mostly of Gentiles responded very favorably with their financial gifts to Paul’s request.

But Paul was not going to make a pitch for an offering from the congregations in Macedonia that he had founded—the church in Berea, Thessalonica and Philippi. The churches there were under a great financial

strain and Paul didn't think it would be right to ask them to give when it seemed that they were barely surviving in their own lives anyway.

Nevertheless, the churches in Macedonia caught wind of the collection that was being taken up for the saints in Jerusalem and they wanted a piece of the action. Paul was completely overwhelmed with how much they gave. Listen to what he says: *"We want you to know, brothers and sisters, 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 free will; begging 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. According, 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."*

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!"

Paul was overwhelmed that the trust of these suffering Christians was so strong in the Lord that they did not give so generously to the offering for the saints in Jerusalem because they were made to feel completely guilty if they did not do so. There was no coercion going on here, Paul makes plain, but it was the Spirit of God that moved them to do this great work and make this generous offering.

Yet, Paul says that there were two essential elements that we ought to notice about the Christians in these struggling Macedonian congregations too: (1) First they gave themselves to the Lord; and (2) secondly, by the will of the Lord they also gave themselves to us!

What does it mean to give yourself to the Lord? It means that we completely surrender our will over to his! It means that we pray fervently every day that prayer Jesus taught us to pray: "Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven!" It means that we are always open to the Spirit's leading and direction in our lives. Paul says in Romans 8: "All those who are led by the Spirit of God are indeed the children of God!"

During the distribution hymn this morning we are going to sing that lovely hymn: "Take my life and let it be consecrated Lord to thee.... Take my will and make it thine, it shall be no longer mine. Take my heart it is thy own, it shall be thy royal throne. Take my love my love I pour, at thy feet its treasure store, take myself and I will be ever only all for thee!"

AND THE INSPIRATION FOR ANY OF THIS IS TO BE FOUND IN THAT POWERFUL, LIFE-GIVING MESSAGE OF THE GOSPEL. "You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, who though he was rich, for your sakes became poor, so that we might become rich through him!"

And when I think that God his Son not sparing, sent him to die, I scarce can take it in; that on the cross my burden gladly bearing, he bled and died to take away my sin. Then sings my soul, my Savior God to thee. How great thou art! How great thou art! Then sings my soul, my Savior God to thee, how great thou art, how great thou art!"

How is it possible for people to give to the work of the Lord out of their poverty? Well we see two clear examples of this, don't we in our Old Testament lesson and our Gospel lesson today...

Elijah and the widow of Zarephath. God had commanded a widow there to feed him, but the widow who would eventually end up feeding Elijah, wasn't really aware of that, though God would convince her to do so.

She was in dire straits. Please give me some water. Bring me a morsel of bread. How in the world did Elijah ever talk her into doing something like that? WAS IT BECAUSE ELIJAH WAS SUCH A SMOOTH TALKER THE KIND OF SALESMEN THAT MANY SALESPEOPLE ARE TODAY---SELL BATHING SUITS TO ESKIMOS?

No this power is inherent in the Word of God, that always accomplishes the purposes for which our God sends it.

This faith wasn't something she arrived at on her own!

Widow putting in her two copper coins that together totaled a penny. Jesus was not criticizing anything else that was happening there that day. Her giving was truly sacrificial.

Yes, Jesus says, "Give and it shall be given to you, good measure, shaken together, pressed down shall be overflowing in your lap!" This doesn't mean that if you give generously of your financial income, the Lord will over time make you a millionaire. He might but not necessarily. BUT HE WILL MAKE YOU RICH IN THE SAME WAY THAT PAUL CAME TO SEE HIMSELF AS RICH. IN LOVE, MERCY, FORGIVENESS, GRACE AND IN the hope of eternal life.

"Godliness with contentment is great gain...for we brought nothing into this world and it is certain that we will take nothing out of this world," Paul tells Timothy "whenever we leave. But if we have food and clothing, with these we can be content!"

To the Philippians Paul writes: "Whatever gain I had I count as loss; indeed I count everything as loss for the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, not having a righteousness of my own based on the Law, but that which depends on faith and comes from God" (Philippians 3).