

+ 2 Corinthians 8:1-9 + Excel in Giving Thanks to the Lord +
+ 21st Sunday after Pentecost + 21 October 2012 +

Growing up, we were always encouraged to strive for excellence—to use the gifts God gave us to the best of our ability to bring him glory. In the classroom, that meant using the academic gifts God gave us to the best of our ability—even if that meant the best of your ability was working hard for a C. On the athletic field, that meant using the physical gifts God gave us to the best of our ability—even if you weren't the best athlete on the field. That encouragement to strive for excellence with the gifts and abilities God had graciously given applied in every aspect of our lives—at school, at work, at home, at church—all to serve our Lord to his glory.

Today, you and I strive for excellence as we raise families, go to work, and serve our communities by using the gifts God has given us to the best of our ability. As individual Christians, we strive to faithfully use the unique spiritual gifts God has given to each of us in service to the Lord and to our neighbor. As a congregation, we strive to put to use the rich and varied gifts God has given us in the ways we connect people in our communities to Christ, in the materials and methods we use to grow in our understanding of God's Word, in the ways we worship and counsel and encourage.

There's one area, however, where we as individual Christians or as a congregation may forget to strive for excellence—giving thanks to the Lord. Now giving thanks to the Lord is obviously something a Christian and a Christian congregation will want to do. As the Apostle Paul will make very clear to us, we have endless reasons to give thanks to the Lord. Nevertheless, giving thanks to the Lord isn't always something that comes easily to Christians and Christian congregations. For that reason, the Apostle points to Jesus and encourages you and me, as he did the Corinthian Christians, to **EXCEL IN GIVING THANKS TO THE LORD**.

By all outward appearances, you wouldn't expect the Christians who lived in Macedonia (today's northern Greece) to excel in giving thanks to the Lord. They were small, relatively young mission congregations in the cities of Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea. They had only been around a few years, and after early blessings from Paul's missionary journey through their cities, the going was slow. In fact, it was downright difficult. They were running into stiff opposition from those who opposed and rejected Christianity. In some cases, they were even facing persecution from city officials and synagogue leaders who opposed Christ and his followers. On top of all that, they were extremely poor. They had difficulty surviving on their own means.

Now you'd expect them to faithfully share the message of Jesus with a community that opposed them, which they did very well. They faithfully served their Lord with their time and talents, and he blessed their efforts. Yet God also gave them an **“overflowing joy”** that showed itself time and again **“in rich generosity”**, a single-minded desire to help others. For example, when Paul was establishing the mission in Thessalonica, the believers in Philippi supported his physical needs. When Paul was in prison, the believers in Philippi sent one of their own with gifts from their church to help him in his time of need. The Lord blessed these Christians with a generous heart towards others that overflowed with joy in Christ.

When word came to these far-flung Christians that their brothers and sisters in Christ in the city of Jerusalem, people whom they had never met, were enduring a terrible famine, they couldn't help, but help again. Paul tells us how their joy overflowed in rich generosity, **“In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people. And they exceeded our expectations: They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us.”**

Here you have a group of Christians who just couldn't hold back their generous, joyful desire to help, in spite of persecution, in spite of poverty. Not even the Apostle himself, who had personally experienced their generosity, expected such single-minded generosity in service to their Lord and their fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. They went above and beyond the call of duty and the expectations of their fellow believers, but why?

“Brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches.” What was it that caused them to overflow with joy, to well up in rich generosity in spite of stiff persecution and extreme poverty? It was **“the grace”** that God had given them in Christ. Paul had come to them with the message that Jesus was their Savior from a lifetime of sin and guilt and death, that Jesus was the fulfillment of all those Old Testament prophecies that a number of them had learned from little on, that Jesus had come to bring life to their dead hearts and cleansing for their sin-corrupted souls. Until Paul came with that message of Jesus, the Macedonians were lost in the darkness of unbelief, stumbling their way

towards eternal death in hell. When he proclaimed that wonderfully good news, however, their burden was lifted, their eyes could see, their hearts filled with **“overflowing joy”**, and they were reborn.

God, in his unmerited, unearned, undeserved love, had shown them a generous mercy through Christ that changed each and every one of their lives forever. They were forgiven. They were alive. They were saved. Every morning what Jesus had done for them filled them to overflowing with joy and inspired them to devote their lives to serve him with whatever gifts and abilities he had given them, which included giving of their meager earthly treasures. So they used what they had and even more to give thanks to their Lord by generously serving their neighbors, especially their fellow believers. As Paul once wrote to the Romans (12:1), **“in view of God’s mercy, [they offered their] bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God”**. To help their fellow Christians, they gave everything back to the Lord giving thanks because God’s grace had done so much for them in Christ.

God’s grace in Christ is also the reason you and I are able to excel in giving thanks to the Lord. By nature, you and I are no different than those Macedonians—lost in the darkness of unbelief and stumbling towards eternal death in hell. In fact, that’s where you and I would be today if not for the life-changing message of Jesus our Savior. You’d still be burdened with a lifetime of guilt. You’d still be selfishly focused on yourself and what matters only for you, and you’d still be wallowing in the spiritual poverty of unbelief. You’d still give God no reason to save you, but yet he did. He still overflowed with that unearned, undeserved grace for you through his Son Jesus Christ.

You were living in spiritual poverty, **“yet for your sakes [Jesus] became poor”**. As much as the Macedonian Christians gave their all in thanksgiving to the Lord, that didn’t hold a candle to all that Jesus gave up for you. As Lord of heaven and earth, as the God of the universe, Jesus **“was rich”**. He had everything because he possessed everything, **“yet for your sakes he became poor”**. He gave it all up to put himself in your place—to be born of a mother like you, to grow up like you, to hunger and thirst and be tired and suffer and grieve like you. He even faced death and the tomb like you will someday, but he didn’t do all that to be a good example.

No, he gave it all up and endured all that, **“so that you through his poverty might become rich.”** His generous grace overflowed and still overflows to you. He took that burden of your lifetime of guilt, including all that selfishness, off your shoulders and bore it for you on the cross. He cleansed your heart with his gracious forgiveness poured out in the water and Word of his gift of Holy Baptism. Now he transforms your focus as he daily “graces” you with his mercy and love, with purpose for this life and eternal life, with joy that overflows and rich generosity that doesn’t hesitate to give thanks to the Lord by freely and gladly giving everything back to the Lord.

Excelling in giving thanks to the Lord isn’t something that’s forced or commanded. It’s not a dead work that grudgingly or reluctantly struggles to slip out of your clenched hand. No, it’s the response of a grateful heart to the goodness of our God and for his grace through our Savior Jesus Christ. Excelling in giving thanks to the Lord is an important part of your Christian life and how each of us, young and old, male and female, rich and poor, shows our love to the God who loved each of us even more.

“But just as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us—see that you also excel in this grace of giving.” The Lord has richly gifted each and every one of us. That doesn’t mean he’s made everyone physically rich or materially wealthy. In fact, for many of us it’s quite the contrary, but he has richly blessed each and every one of us in so many different ways. When you give back to the Lord with the gifts he has given to you, it’s much more than bills and coins and checks. It’s much more than taking some time or using talents or doing something you like to do, instead it’s all part of your worship of the Savior who became poor that you might become truly rich as an heir of an eternal inheritance beyond your wildest dreams.

So then excel in giving thanks to the Lord, who has given you everything. God has given you time, so use it to say thank you to the God who guided time to save you. God has given you talents, obvious and not as much, so use them to say thank you to the God who used his best gifts to rescue you from an eternity in hell. God has given you treasures, many or few, so use them to say thank you to Jesus, who became poor to make you eternally rich. God has graciously given you rich and abundant gifts, especially your Savior. How will you use them to say thank you to him? May the God who saved us by his grace cause us to always overflow with joy that we may well up with rich, generous thanksgiving for his saving grace. Amen.