

SURPASS THE ORDINARY

2 Corinthians 8: 7-9

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May 31, 2009

PROLOGUE

What does it take to excel in the grace of giving?

Clara Null writes about living in a small town with one bank and three churches. She says:

“Early one Monday morning, the bank called all three churches with the same request: ‘Could you bring in Sunday’s collection right away? We’re out of \$1 bills.’”

SCRIPTURE

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. {8} I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. {9} For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich (2 Cor 8:7-9 NIV).

INTRODUCTION

The mother-church of Christianity, the Jerusalem Church, was facing tough times. Persistent food shortages in Palestine because of the famine of A.D. 46, economic setbacks that took place under the reign of the Emperor Claudius (see Acts 11:27-30), together with the ever-growing expectations that people placed on the church put a tremendous financial burden on the congregation. The Apostle Paul made an appeal for help, asking for what we would call today a special offering. Although vested with full apostolic authority (10:8; 13:10), Paul declined to issue a command, preferring instead to make a request. And yet his request says something profound about what it means to go beyond the ordinary in our walk with God.

If you are content with the ordinary, satisfied with the status quo, then you are not going to be interested in what is being said today. But if there is a hunger and thirst inside of you, a restlessness to know more and more of Christ and his purpose for your life, then let us listen together to what the Apostle is saying to the Corinthian Christians and to us.

1. BEYOND ORDINARY FAITH

Paul reminds the Corinthian Christians that they have excelled in faith. But this had not always been the case. When Paul first arrived in Corinth it was a town of easy believism, a virtual menagerie of religions. The restored city of Paul's day was a Roman city, but the

inhabitants worshiped both Greek and Roman gods. There was a temple of Apollo. There were shrines to Hermes, Heracles, Athena, and Poseidon. There was a famous temple dedicated to Asclepius, the god of healing. There were mystery religions, and a huge cult of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, together with over 1,000 temple prostitutes devoted to her service. No question about it, religion was big in Corinth. You would have been hard pressed to find even one atheist.

But for all that “belief” in Corinth it made little impact on their day-to-day lives. So Paul came along and told them about Jesus Christ. This was not the story of a mythical deity. This was not a religion that brought out the worst in human behavior. No. Paul said, in effect, “Jesus Christ is real. He brings a life-changing message of hope. Faith in him makes all the difference in the world and makes all the difference for eternity.”

According to Gallop Polls, most Americans believe in God but this makes little difference in their day-to-day lives. If Paul were around today he may well ask, “What kind of faith do you want? - The ordinary but ineffectual faith of the majority or a living, dynamic faith in an extraordinary Savior?” Friends, Jesus Christ rose from the dead, he is alive today, ready to enter and change those who invite him into their lives. Take a step beyond the ordinary in your faith.

2. BEYOND ORDINARY SERVICE

Paul mentions speech and knowledge. This is a reference to spiritual gifts. Paul reminds the Corinthian Christians that they have excelled in the ministry of spiritual gifts. But this had not always been the case. In the early days of the church they split into factions based on different well-known personalities. Paul writes:

“What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Peter "; still another, "I follow Christ." Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul?” (1 Cor 1:12-13).

It took a great deal of effort on Paul’s part to get the Corinthian Christians past these personality cults. He stressed that he and Apollos were but servants of the Lord. Indeed, every Christian is to be a servant of the Lord. Every Christian is gifted with one or more special abilities for service.

As Presbyterian Christians we have immeasurably benefitted from the great faith renewal movement known as the Protestant Reformation. The Protestant Reformation was a re-discovery of three important truths. Martin Luther, John Calvin and other Reformers said, “Salvation is a gift from God to be received by faith. You cannot earn it or work for it. It is by God’s grace.” And a great many people said, “Hurray! This is the message we have been longing to hear.” The Reformers said, “The Bible is the unique and trustworthy authority for

our faith and practice.” And the people said, “Hurray! This is the message we have been longing to hear.” The Reformers said, “The Bible teaches the priesthood of all believers. Every Christian is gifted by God for ministry.” And the people said, “Uh, can we get back to you on that one?”

So the Protestant Reformation was only 2/3 of a success. To complete the Reformation we need to start believing and practicing the priesthood of all believers. Discover, develop and use your spiritual gifts. Take a step beyond the ordinary in your service to God.

3. BEYOND ORDINARY LOVE

Paul reminds the Corinthian Christians that they have excelled in earnest love. But this, too, had not always been the case. In fact, the reason Paul wrote the now famous Love Chapter (1 Corinthians 13) was because the Corinthian Christians were so uncaring for one another.

True love requires a great deal of hard work with ample doses of patience and forgiveness. And when you have supplied large amounts of these then go back for more. To paraphrase Lloyd Ogilvie, “Christians are not supposed to be tight-fisted, clench-teethed, sour-faced people. Rather, we are to be the ones who love and laugh and give ourselves lavishly to Jesus Christ.”

Love is hard work but it is not necessarily supposed to be so serious. People who live above their circumstances usually possess a well-developed sense of humor. Perhaps it is a gift from God. Chuck Swindoll tells about meeting a woman from Chicago who had reared 12 children starting when she was 32. She told people that she got married at age 31 and had never worried about getting married. She said, “I left my future in God's hands. But I must tell you, every night I hung a pair of men's pants on my bed and knelt down to pray this prayer:

Father in heaven, hear my prayer,
And grant it if you can;
I've hung a pair of trousers here,
Please fill them with a man.

The following Sunday, Swindoll shared that humorous story with his congregation. He especially noticed the different reactions of a father and his teenaged son. The dad laughed out loud, but the son seemed preoccupied. On that particular Sunday the mother of this family had stayed home with their sick daughter. Neither father nor son mentioned the story, because a couple of weeks later Swindoll received this note from the mother:

Dear Chuck:
I am wondering if I should be worried about something. It has to do with our son. For the last two weeks I have noticed that before our son turns the light

out and goes to sleep at night, he hangs a woman's swimsuit over the foot of his bed. . . . Should I be concerned about this?

Swindoll assured her there was nothing to worry about. He went on to tell the congregation that the young man recently married, so hey! Maybe the swimsuit idea works.

Jesus said, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another"(John 13:35 NRSV). Take a joyous step beyond the ordinary in your love.

4. BEYOND ORDINARY GIVING

Having reminded the Corinthian Christians that they have excelled in faith, service and love, Paul now asks them to excel, also, in the grace of giving. He expresses this in four ways:

First, he brings to their attention what the Macedonian Christians have done. Even though they had fewer financial resources than the Corinthians and even though they, unlike the Corinthians, were being persecuted because of their faith, the Macedonians came up with an extraordinarily generous offering. Apparently, Paul saw in the enthusiastic generosity of the Macedonian Christians a convenient standard for assessing the genuineness of the Corinthians' professed love for Christ and his Church. The question is, are we more like the Macedonians or more like the Corinthians?

Second, Paul recalls that the Corinthians had previously said they would help and told Paul's friend, Titus, words to that effect, but they never acted on it. (They said they would help a full year before the Macedonians gave their offering.) A vague offer of help is not much help.

Third, Paul argues that spiritual excellence necessarily means gracious generosity. While it is possible for someone to be generous with their money and have little or no faith, it is not possible to desire a closer walk with God and not want to be generous in giving.

And **Fourth**, compared to the sacrifice that Christ made, any gift of ours is a small sacrifice.

In recent months, First Church has experienced what so many organizations have been going through during these economically challenging times. But giving to the Lord's work is not like ordinary giving, because it significantly impacts our ability to further the Gospel to a hurting, and broken world. Like Paul and Titus before us, we are appealing to members and friends of the church for the support needed to carry out the mission and ministry God has given us. To do this, we need to take a step beyond the ordinary in our giving. We are asking those who are able, to make a gift or a promise of a gift equal to one extra month's giving. Of course, any amount you can give over and above your regular giving would be helpful and greatly appreciated.

A number of you have already responded and that is great. Many of you are prepared today to make a gift or a pledge and that is wonderful. Some of you “accidentally” left the information on your kitchen table and now you are deeply distressed. But I say, “fear not.” We have provided extra cards in the pew racks. And during these next few minutes leading up to the offering, we hope you will prayerfully consider how you can excel in the grace of giving.

CONCLUSION

A sloven and poorly dressed soldier appeared before his commander, Alexander the Great. The mighty leader asked his name. The unimpressive soldier responded, Alexander, sir." Alexander the Great then commanded, "Change your name or change your ways!" As Christians we bear the name of Christ and with that comes the expectation that we will seek to live up to that name. So let us go beyond the ordinary in faith. Let us go beyond the ordinary in service. Let us go beyond the ordinary in love. Let us go beyond the ordinary in giving. Let us yield ourselves, body and soul, to an extraordinary Savior, who is Christ the Lord.