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Peace, Sun Prairie
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Pentecost 22 -Christian Stewardship

2 Corinthians 8:7

LET'S EXCEL IN THE GRACE OF GIVING

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.

One word that characterizes Peace Lutheran Church is “excellence.” No church can do everything. But whatever Peace congregation and school do is done exceptionally well.

Peace congregation is not unlike the Christian congregation in ancient Corinth. Whenever a congregation of believers is highly gifted, it is usually accompanied by equally treacherous spiritual dilemmas.

- From satan’s point of view, he’s not going to sit back and let good things happen without trying to ruin it.
- And the reaction of our own sinful flesh is to cry foul and chafe whenever the Kingdom of God is advancing either in our own hearts or in others’.
- But God’s purpose in afflicting His people is so that our faith in Christ does not grow comfortable and lazy and we become ineffective in serving Him. Through afflictions He spurs us to pursue excellence in our Christian life.

One affliction right now at Peace is our financial situation –and it’s big. Week after week our offerings come up one third to one half short. And it’s been going this way for years. How much longer can it go on?

- Is it an economic problem? We could go round and round on that without ever coming to a firm conclusion.

- Is it a problem of Peace’s money management, or too much pork in Peace’s budget? Your elected officers and auditors testify that that is not the problem, and the financial report is always available upon request if you want to see for yourself.
- Is it a spiritual problem? Yes.

How can we say that? Because nothing for believers is merely physical, or business, or earthly, or practical. Everything for us is spiritual. Every check you write either praises God or offends him.

Today, in this portion of His Word God challenges us to *excel in the grace of giving*.

The Corinthians were in the process of a capital appeal to raise money for their fellow Christians in Jerusalem. So Paul encourages them: “*Just as you excel in everything*” –and then he lists what things “–*in faith*.” Faith is mentioned first, for that is the most important grace of all in our sanctified lives. It is through faith in Christ that we are saved. It is through faith in Christ that our sins are forgiven and we are remade into God’s holy people. And the Bible says without faith it is impossible to please God. Therefore faith is the root, the source of all our Christian living and good works. Faith is a gift –not something we chose to have. It was given to us by the Holy Spirit.

The next grace mentioned is “*speech*,” that is, in the preaching, the teaching, the doctrinal instruction that went on there. Not only did they believe it, they spoke it well.

From their speech came the grace of “*knowledge*.” They had a good handle on the truth, a good understanding of Bible teaching, a good grasp of what was wholesome and what was harmful, and plenty of experience applying that message to their lives and to various situations. They also saw and touched and tasted the Lord’s salvation in the sacraments. They knew God.

From their knowledge of God came a “*complete earnestness*.” They were sincere, eager, willing, diligent. They looked for

opportunities to serve. They weren't satisfied for half-way. They pursued excellence from a conviction that whatever they did, they were serving the Lord. I think of so many here at Peace who have volunteered so many hours of their time in so many ways without any pay. Their only reward was the privilege of being able to serve the King. That is a grace from God to us to be endowed with such an attitude.

Paul wrote the Corinthian's complete earnestness led to "*your love for us.*" Christian faith, speech, knowledge, and earnestness cannot help but express itself in love to fellow believers, to serve faithfully in your home and life's vocation.

Shortcomings, notwithstanding, all of those things describe Peace congregation. I'll read it again: "*But just as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us.*" Just like the Corinthian congregation God has lavished on us here at Peace spiritual gift upon spiritual gift.

Since we excel in such spiritual wealth, the Holy Spirit urges us to draw from our spiritual maturity and now take it to the next level. He says, "*See that you also excel in this grace of giving.*"

Just like any other spiritual gift, the matter of giving is a grace, an undeserved kindness from God to us. Anyone can have money. But only a gifted believer will regard money as an opportunity to serve Christ. Do we?

We haven't always, have we? We've regarded money as

- a means for survival,
- a means to be secure,
- even a means for recreation.

But we haven't always looked at our paychecks as a means to serve Christ. That is sin.

We like to pile up walls around our sin:

- We figure we are financially strapped. That may or may not be true, but we use it as a reason not to truly evaluate where God fits into our financial picture or not truly to sacrifice for Him. We'll write him a check for 10 dollars like a spur of the moment birthday present when it might be possible we could actually afford three times that much.
- Another wall is that we like to bring up the Gospel Lesson about the widow—we figure, "My two dollars are probably more pleasing to God than some rich person giving two hundred dollars"—as though giving a small amount is a virtue in some way. But what did that widow really do? Jesus said, "She gave all she had to live on." Have you? Everything you have to live on? Next month's rent? All your savings? Your entire social security check? Then don't be too hasty to equate yourself with that lady. She excelled in the grace of giving.
- Another wall is that all the church ever wants is my money. Well who is the church? I am not the church—though it is my job to teach you what God says about money. The Administrative Council is not the church though you've elected or appointed them to manage things on your behalf. Who is the church? You are! You the believer! You are Peace church. It is to you that Christ gave the Great Commission to make disciples of all nations. Isn't that one reason you banded together with other believers and formed a congregation to help carry out that Commission? The church has as much money as you have.

So how can we excel in the grace of giving? First, let's repent for not seeing our income first of all as a way to serve Christ.

Secondly, know and believe that because of Christ's sufferings and death on the cross you and I are forgiven. God is not grudgingly letting us off. He gives us a new day with a clean record of what's on our hearts. With His forgiveness He has opened up a new, everlasting life to us—a different life from the one we were locked in before.

Thirdly, we are more likely to excel if we are filled with gratitude to our God. We'll care more about doing it right for Him. As we keep ourselves immersed in the truth about His forgiveness through Word and Sacrament the Holy Spirit will fill us with gratitude. We'll consider the matter of giving not to be an imposition or a threat, but rather an opportunity we were looking for. We won't be concerned about meeting a budget but about giving God our best.

Fourthly, to excel in something requires planning. In fact, in the Bible God tells us He wants us to plan what we give. He wants it to be percentage giving. We begin by saying, "How can I best serve Christ with this paycheck, because as a Christian I will be serving Him with every last penny."

As you divide up your paycheck you begin with, "This much we will give for the work of the Gospel in our church. Then this much will be for property tax, this much for insurances, this much for car-payments, and so on," for those things serve Christ too. But it will be something you have to put thought into.

Then make sure to set that amount for the church aside somehow so it doesn't disappear in the busyness of the month. And you will find that God's many promises about this matter are true: you won't go broke because you gave the Lord too much. To the contrary you will be even more blessed. Do you imagine that God abandoned the widow in the Gospel Lesson today after Jesus took notice of her and left her to starve after she gave her offering to the temple? God is not finite, nor is He confined to our salary.

Finally, rejoice to give your offering. Oh, be glad in your heart when you get to drop it in the plate! Rejoice that the King of heaven wants to use you for His saving purposes. There is no higher point to our existence here on earth than to be used by God to promote salvation to the world.

By God's grace, we here at Peace excel in so many ways. Let's also excel at the grace of giving.