

“Spiritual Investment”

Cultivating the Kingdom of God

- 2 Corinthians 8 -

by Pastor Tim Dodson
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2 Corinthians 8 *Moreover, brethren, we make known to you the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia: 2 that in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded in the riches of their liberality. 3 For I bear witness that according to their ability, yes, and beyond their ability, they were freely willing, 4 imploring us with much urgency that we would receive the gift and the fellowship of the ministering to the saints. 5 And not only as we had hoped, but they first gave themselves to the Lord, and then to us by the will of God. 6 So we urged Titus, that as he had begun, so he would also complete this grace in you as well. 7 But as you abound in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all diligence, and in your love for us—see that you abound in this grace also. 8 I speak not by commandment, but I am testing the sincerity of your love by the diligence 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, that you through His poverty might become rich. 10 And in this I give advice: It is to your advantage not only to be doing what you began and were desiring to do a year ago; 11 but now you also must complete the doing of it; that as there was a readiness to desire it, so there also may be a completion out of what you have. 12 For if there is first a willing mind, it is accepted according to what one has, and not according to what he does not have. 13 For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened; 14 but by an equality, that now at this time your abundance may supply their lack, that their abundance also may supply your lack—that there may be equality. 15 As it is written, "He who gathered much had nothing left over, and he who gathered little had no lack." 16 But thanks be to God who puts the same earnest care for you into the heart of Titus. 17 For he not only accepted the exhortation, but being more diligent, he went to you of his own accord. 18 And we have sent with him the brother whose praise is in the gospel throughout all the churches, 19 and not only that, but who was also chosen by the churches to travel with us with this gift, which is administered by us to the glory of the Lord Himself and to show your ready mind, 20 avoiding this: that anyone should blame us in this lavish gift which is administered by us— 21 providing honorable things, not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men. 22 And we have sent with them our brother whom we have often proved diligent in many things, but now much more diligent, because of the great confidence which we have in you. 23 If anyone inquires about Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker concerning you. Or if our brethren are inquired about, they are messengers of the churches, the glory of Christ. 24 Therefore show to them, and before the churches the proof of your love and of our boasting on your behalf.*

Vs 1-2

Paul seems to be changing subjects here, yet he still is embracing what many would see as fairly radical themes. These are all issues that involve difficult...*in the flesh*...aspects of Christian living. Issues that in many cases have simply been rejected by what is falsely called God's church today. Back in chapter 5 Paul said something that started this ball rolling for all that was to follow in the subsequent chapters. He said in verse 17 of 5 that "*if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.*" It's a verse that we may well be familiar with, but consider the ramifications of what he is saying. "All things...*are new.*" That verse puts it "all on the table." No more compartmentalizing... no more separating the spiritual from the secular. No more holding back. No more negotiating and deal making with God. If you are indeed "*in Christ,*" then you are "*all in.*" Not the life of the modern nice, neat, and respectable suburban Sunday Christianity. No...all that is left is a radical "suit-up-for-war" version where a lot of folks will treat you like they did Jesus, or Paul, or Peter, or John the Baptist; they won't like you, and for many of us, that's simply a deal breaker.

Paul has already plowed through chapter six's "enduring hardships and suffering" section, then clarified what true grace was and moreover what it wasn't, *which literally kicked the feet out from under many of us spiritually speaking.* Then he moved on to the need to have a level of separation from the world and from unbelievers and taught us about the road of adult spirituality called "sanctification." He then jumped into the mandatory practice of repentance in chapter 7 and concreted it in as a corner post of Christian living.

Paul now moves on into chapter 8, where he ventures into the taboo subject of Christian giving. His account begins with the church in Macedonia, who, *despite their own trials and difficulties,* still had within them a "joy unspeakable and full of glory." (1 Pet 1:8) In their expression of such, they gave financially to *their* mission field, even though they were quite poor by anyone else's standards and probably should have been a mission field themselves instead of contributing to one.

When our church started, we had about two quarters to rub together. No one was paid in those days. So we rented a storefront downtown and dreamed of better days. At least at first it was the tithes of the two pastors that kept the doors open and the lights on. Frankly we didn't care. We were having the time of our lives! Then the historical society who housed the Dunn County museum here in this church approached me about buying this building from them. That offer served as fodder for our good laughs, for nothing seemed further from the realm of possibility. Yet even in those days we were still missional ...supporting national missionaries through Gospel for Asia.

We just instinctively knew that hunkering down and only looking inward was not what we were supposed to be doing. During the months that passed after their first approach, the historical society stayed after us. They offered to carry the debt and sell us the building 'contract for deed.' That sounded great except we still needed a down payment and we weren't even close to having it. So in the following months the historical society sold the build at least twice and both times it fell through. God, *it seems*, was not having it any other way than the way He wanted! Finally one day a family in the church sold their house and tithed on the sale. One check...for the exact amount needed for the down payment. We called the historical society and asked "do you still want to sell us that church?"

We bought the Duluth Church the same day we paid off this one. It came available when a messianic Jewish fellowship was merging with another one in Superior. We, *only half serious really*, lobed a crazy offer their way and *uh oh*...they took it! They passed the keys to us and told us that everything inside was ours...the dishes, the pews, the kid's toys, the sound system...*everything*! It was a turnkey sale...just walk in the first Sunday and have church! All the while we all remained missionally giving...and all the while God took care of us. Even today...more than ever. Last year, for every 3.60 that came into the church, a dollar of it went to the mission field. That's around 30% of our total income. That's not meant as braggadocio...it is meant to present the point that you cannot outgive God. If you indeed "seek first the kingdom of God, then...*all these things WILL be added unto you.*" And further, Jesus promised that "... there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My sake and the gospel's, who shall not receive a hundredfold now **in this time**—houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions—and in the age to come, eternal life. (Mr 10:30)

But let this be known: giving to such needs never comes at a convenient time or in seemingly bountiful moments. Yet the need "out there" is greater than ever and it is up to us, not someone else, to step up to the plate, just like the church in Macedonia. This is not meant as some sort of weird "ponzi scheme" or stock investment. It is meant as an obedience and moreover as a statement to the world that we believe that God has "got our back."

No matter what else that church ever did or didn't do, no matter any shortcoming they might have incurred, they are immortalized in the pages of scripture as having stepped up to the plate, despite their own personal and church poverty, for the glory of God and the furthering of the kingdom. They did this even when the kingdom was not in their backyard, but was very far away.

It seems staggering to read the contrasting words; "trial, affliction, deep poverty," with "riches, liberality, abundance, and joy." This is the reality of a real frontline faith! Despite those who would have you believe that Christianity is *...or at least should be*, a walk of ease and affluence, **this** is the true description of the life of faith! I honestly and seriously do not want to pastor any other church than one like that.

8:3-4

Now, as if to put to rest the "forever asked question" by flinching Christians, the saints of Macedonia apparently did not measure out an exact ten percent tithe from their income. They simply gave "beyond their ability." Please note there is nothing here about them emptying their bank account to send to the mission field. But there is nothing here about just giving the left-overs either. It says, "beyond their ability," meaning, frankly, **more than they could afford.**

Now hear me say this: all this is not meant to be a "push" in any way. No one is going to pass the plate, because we don't have a plate and we wouldn't pass it if we did. Giving is to mean something, not just to the recipient, **but to the giver.** This Macedonia fellowship gave not only of their finances, they also gave of themselves; *the "fellowship of the ministering to the saints."* That is how we are to give; any gift must carry a very real part of ourselves. In the intangibles, and even in the physical...*the sweat and blood*, if possible. That's why we have sought to never be merely "check-writing missionaries" but ones who will go out and minister personally, work ourselves, and rub shoulders with those we seek to bless. Part of that reason is definitely self-serving! By doing so **we are also blessed!** By doing so, we get stronger, more mature, and clearer in our vision, *not to mention the part where we get a really good story when it's over!*

8:5-6

Some people actually find it easy to write a check, but are quite reluctant to give of themselves. However, just as it was with our own church, this is only where the Macedonians *started.* They *first* gave themselves to the Lord and then gave themselves to these fellow believers. The financial giving came after they had already given of themselves in heart and soul. We have sought to personally engage all those we have financially blessed, both domestically and internationally. Many of you have given your yearly vacation time and money to serve on a missions outreach. "Contributions to the work of the Lord," says G. Campbell Morgan, "are only valuable as they are the gifts of those who are themselves yielded to God."

Clearly Paul was saying that it now was the time for the Corinthians to step up as the Macedonians had. Not in just word, but in action. Time to set the excuses aside and look at the eternal picture. The “grace of giving,” like the “perfecting of holiness” that we covered last week, was to be completed by these newly rejuvenated believers. God had and would continue to do his part, but would they? Their faith was now to actually play out in action. Literally, to put their sweat and their money behind their words.

8:7

We know that the church at Corinth abounded in so many spiritual gifts, but now it was time to exercise faithfulness in this area too. So many people wonder why the power of God is so small in their lives and their faith is so weak. Often it is because they are holding back in their spiritual walk. Many of us will quite quickly bow out of the battle when our schedule starts getting squeezed, the serving starts to get uncomfortable in some manner, or when the financial cost starts to make us flinch. We will *give* and we will *serve* as long as it does not cause too much discomfort. But we have already covered this issue: *true Christian living is a war and often quite “uncomfortable.”* In Romans 12, Paul pleaded with the believers, **and us**, to “... give your **bodies** to God because of all he has done for you. Let them be a **living and holy sacrifice** — the kind he will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship him.” Paul elaborates further in that same immediate passage...giving some practical and yet specific directions on living out that real dynamic Christian life, saying...*amongst other things*, that we should “*not just pretend to love others... (but) really love them. Hate what is wrong. Hold tightly to what is good. Love each other with genuine affection, and take delight in honoring each other. Never be lazy, but work hard and serve the Lord enthusiastically. Rejoice in our confident hope. Be patient in trouble, and keep on praying. When God’s people are in need, be ready to help them...*” (9-13)

Ever the consistent and faithful pastor, He reiterated that same thought again in Galatians 6:10 “*Whenever we have the opportunity, we should do good to everyone, especially to our Christian brothers and sisters.*” Again in 1 Tim 6:18 “*They should be rich in good works and should give generously to those in need, always being ready to share with others whatever God has given them.*” And even again in Hebrews 13:16 “*Don’t forget to do good and to share what you have with those in need, for such sacrifices are very pleasing to God.*”

The bottom line is that our giving must be based on a real love, and our love is only truly proven by action! Love cannot be known unless it is demonstrated by deeds of compassion and giving. Love demands sacrifice. In fact, there is no love unless there is a sacrificial spirit. This means sacrifice of self, time, *and* finances.

8:8-9

Notice that Paul was not demanding this giving. True faithful giving can never be forced or coerced, but must be practiced out of a willing heart. Otherwise it is meaningless and without blessing. Paul was not practicing strong arm tactics or guilt through “double tithing Sundays.” It had to be personal ...and it had to be sacrificial. He understood the reality that such a sacrifice can often indeed be a test for us personally. Many of us can be so ‘right on’ in every area but this one. Yet Jesus practiced what He preached and was the supreme example. He gave all that He had and all that He was. Again, this runs contrary to the prevalence of “comfortable Christianity” that is so widely propagated in America today!

8:10-11

Apparently this church had at some point begun a missions directive within their church, but it had been sidetracked by all the internal sin and squabbling. Paul was encouraging them to get back to what they intended to do before. Certainly one can see the hand of Satan here. For any church that makes missions outreach a priority is going to get “special attention” from Satan, therefore such fellowships must be mature and be “on their toes.”

8:12-14

This is how God looks at this issue of giving for each of us individually. God wants us to give according to what He has given *us!* But such a plan works only if we truly understand what God indeed **has** given us! We are so apt to look at those who have more money and possessions than us...*and there will always be someone*, and feel we are so poor, instead of looking at the vast majority of the world and realizing how very rich we are in comparison! Furthermore, we must definitely begin this journey with a willing mind; not looking for a loophole or a way to slip out of the responsibility and accountability. Yet we also cannot be pressured by man, or under some sort of guilt trip. But we must act rather out of love, compassion, and a desire to be a part of the fight! We can sit in the proverbial spiritual bleachers with our pom poms or we can get on the field and be a part of what is happening!

“God intends each man to have a share of the good things of life. Some gather more, however, and some less. Those who have more should share with those who have less. God permits the unequal distribution of property, not so that the rich shall selfishly enjoy it, but share it with the poor.” (Unknown)

8:15

This verse is a quotation from Exodus 16:18. When the children of Israel gathered manna each day, some gathered more than others. But it didn’t matter! For when the manna was distributed, each received the same amount—one omer, or about five pints.

So “*He who gathered much had nothing left over, and he who gathered little had no lack.*”

Furthermore, if anyone tried to *hoard* manna, it rooted and became wormy! Such “equalization” didn’t happen by miracle or magic. It happened because those who had more *shared* with those who didn’t have enough.

8:16-17

Young Pastor Titus was no doubt the one who carried this letter from Paul to the church in Corinth. Paul thanked the Lord for Titus, who had the same heart toward this group of believers that he had. It is a rare and blessed thing to share the ministry with like-minded and mutually committed brothers and sisters in Christ. I am one of those so blessed individuals! The other pastors both here, in Duluth, and River Falls...they make me look good and bless me always. This is rare, as most come to God...*and often the pastor*, with their hand *out*...only to *receive*, not to *give* or to *serve*.

When a pastor such as myself finds a fellow “soldier,” he is apt to become tight friends with that individual. It is hard to find people who can readily understand both the joys and the pains of front-line ministry. Paul was all about serving the Lord and doing so with a passion. Again, he was joyous over the fact that this young minister Titus had the same heart he had.

8:18-21

Along with Titus, two others would be coming to the church in Corinth. Since money was involved, Paul was moving to be extremely accountable by placing trusted brethren in charge of receiving and transporting it (more than one of them at a time). Such a practice keeps everyone honest and accountable. Furthermore, it keeps Paul out of it. That way no one could ever say he was in it for the money or that he was mishandling the finances given to the Lord’s work.

It is critical that a church fellowship remain transparent and “above reproach” when it comes to the handling of money. We hold here in this fellowship, just as Paul so demonstrated, that the senior pastor should not be the one handling the money. Rather, trusted and faithful individuals are to be chosen to do so. There should be a full accounting of everything with multiple individuals participating, and an accounting of that money made available to the tithing flock.

Many people want to withhold accountability and transparency in one area or another in their lives and even the church. We naturally don’t care to answer questions or willingly allow oversight of some area of our lives. And not surprisingly, it is most often that particular area that we find ourselves getting into trouble in!

Isa 29:15 “*Destruction is certain for those who try to hide their plans from the LORD, who try to keep him in the dark concerning what they do! The LORD can’t see us, you say to yourselves. He doesn’t know what is going on!*”

The Lord seeks for us to be honorable not only in God’s sight, but in the sight of men! Like it or not, that is the family/fellowship body-life dynamic prescribed in all of scripture. There are no Christian islands in which to live out our Christianity without mutual accountability and interaction. That doesn’t mean we ignore Matthew 6:3 that tells us “... when you give to someone in need, don’t let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.” It has been our practice...in a righteous effort to find the ground between these two principles, that it is ours to express our giving *quality* and never the *quantity*.

8:22

There are all sorts of guessing and conjecture as to just who this mysterious brother is mentioned in this verse. Paul does not give his name, but maybe that was just the point! Service unto God is never about personal credit or glory. If we cannot give and serve in anonymity, we will never be able to handle publicity if it does come. I have had people try to put checks into my hand instead of in the offering/tithe box in back. That is clearly displaying a need for credit and pastoral affirmation. The individual in our passage who was handling the money was not a novice or a “newbie.” He had already proven himself diligent in *many* things, meaning he was known to be committed, faithful, and consistent servant. This is where the transparency plays out. He was diligent not just for a while, but had been for a long time.

8:23-24

Clearly Paul was quite willing to give Titus his full support, his “stamp of approval.” Titus had evidently served beside Paul long enough for Paul to gather a clarity as to his integrity. Paul’s opinion, *his designation* of these men, is high! They were messengers of the churches, and they were the glory of Christ.

Note finally verse 24: Paul was herein going against our modern Christian ideal, for he went so far as to actually ask the believers to *show the proof* of their love. Again...this action via **quality** and **transparency**, not *quantity*. Now they in Corinth were to *prove* that *they* were worthy of Paul’s boasting about them! Today, it seems we all are just supposed to accept a person’s word on the matters of love, faith, and salvation, and never expect him or her to actually *live* it out. But we have *and hopefully always will* stick with Paul on this matter and seek the manifest of one’s faithfulness.