**2 CORINTHIANS 8:1-9, (13-15)**

**GRACE FOR OTHERS**

 One church helps out another, not because they were rich and could do so. In fact, they were poor. In fact, Paul says that their extreme poverty overflowed in a wealth of generosity. Paul says that they gave beyond their means. Some, including Paul may have told them that they shouldn’t be doing this, but rather they should be taking care of themselves, and not put themselves at financial risk. However, he says that they begged for the favour of helping out their fellow saints.

Paul refers to these actions by the Macedonian church towards the Corinthian church as an act of the grace of God. Most other people would see their behaviour as financial irresponsibility. I myself, have seen this financial irresponsibility from Christians, and it wasn’t talked about by many as an act of the grace of God. Such behaviour was condemned and ridiculed, as so often our sinful nature wants to do, to judge others.

There were two old churches in a dual country parish, about the same distance apart as Grenfell and Wolseley. They weren’t thriving, and in fact one of them was dying. And so it was decided to join them by building one new church. The complaints, the anger, and the ridicule from the communities was everywhere, but the two congregations pressed on, and somehow a beautiful new church was built about forty years ago, and it still thrives to this day.

People in the community gossiped and mocked the churches as to the debt they would face building this new church, and that it wouldn’t last. Yet, shortly after the opening of the new church it was discovered that this new church wasn’t in great debt for building their new church, bringing the two congregations together. One farmer was in debt. He had funded a majority of the construction of the new church, and now the people mocked him as he faced bankruptcy and loosing his farm.

However, the community came together, raised funds and rescued this farmer and his farm from the auction house. It was still talked about for years afterwards about how reckless he was to risk everything for this church, but the church and the farm still stood and functioned. You have to ask yourselves. If a community can come together to save a farm, why couldn’t they come together and build the new church, but instead one farmer had to risk it all to keep these two congregations going.

This text is an excellent text to be used to teach stewardship in the church, and these two congregations from our text can be used as examples to guide us as a parish of two struggling churches. In fact, the story I just told you about the churches in the village where I grew up can be something for our parish to ponder. And I’ll leave it at that for you to ponder and consider your own stewardship.

The greater message of our text goes beyond stewardship and how we take care our churches and one another to the grace of God and how He takes care of us. Grace is what Paul begins and ends our text with. Of course, the complete text in the Bible goes on beyond our selected text to talk more about the financial situation of those two churches, and how that was being dealt with, and if you want to seek for more advice on how to handle your finances, then continue reading the text once you get home. Yet, for now I’m going to stop with our finances and continue with God’s grace.

Grace is unmerited favour. Someone does something for you that you in no way deserve – that’s grace. Mercy from God is God not giving you the punishment that you deserve for your sins. Grace is God giving you the salvation that you don’t deserve. Christians have summed up grace with this catchy little phrase: God’s Riches At Christ’s Expense.

So, considering that grace is about salvation from God through Jesus, how does that fit into Paul’s discussion about church finances and one church helping another in a time of need? He also describes this generosity as ministering to the saints, which may be easier for us to understand, but an act of grace, not so much.

In our text Paul refers to grace four times. By doing this he wants to tie all of this discussion about finances and giving to those in need to unmerited favour, and then make the connection to the undeserved love that God has given and continues to give to us, His people.

God’s grace is a giving grace. It centers around His gift of Jesus and His redemptive work on our behalf. God’s grace is meant to move Christians to be gracious to one another, to freely and gladly give from everything that we have, material goods, time, talent, or money, to those in need as if we are giving those things to our Lord God. The offerings that you place in the offering basket are more than money. They are a part of your worship to God. You are giving of yourself to God. Day by day Christians receive God’s grace and acknowledge God’s grace by freely giving gifts back to God. As Paul said, “On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come” (1 Corinthians 16:2). Basically, each week have your offing ready for Sunday morning, before Sunday morning.

 The offerings a Christian brings to God are a fruit of their faith, the response of a grateful heart to the goodness of God. That’s why Paul is careful to say, “I am not commanding you.” He doesn’t want offerings to be given reluctantly or grudgingly. He doesn’t mention any amount people are to give, but their attitude – earnestness, zeal and joy.

 Yet, after addressing the stewardship between these two churches, Paul turns to the greatest example of stewardship that he could give, that of Jesus. He simply says, “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” (v. 9). You all know this, and so I shouldn’t have to tell you again, but I’m going to anyways, because you need to keep hearing it.

 From eternity there was nothing that didn’t belong to Jesus. He was eternally rich, yet for our sakes He became poor. Jesus existed as God before He was conceived as a man. He was immeasurably rich before His incarnation. Yet, Jesus became the poorest of the poor when He submitted to the Law and fell victim to its curse, a process that ended in naked destitution on the cross.

 We don’t like to draw or paint pictures, or make sculptures of Jesus that way – naked – because we find that too humiliating, too degrading for God. Have you ever seen a naked Jesus on a cross? That has been a rare sight for me. We don’t like to think about it, and we don’t like to see it, but back then people were crucified naked. No clothes. Exposed, beaten, mutilated and bloodied for all to see, while soldiers gambled for His clothes. For your sake Jesus became poor, so that you might become rich through salvation.

 Jesus, the God-man swapped places with sinners. He underwent the agony, desolation, and deserved punishment of fallen humankind. In return, sinners receive forgiveness and a share in His Sonship.

 Looked at this way it’s not difficult to see that the Jesus whom Paul holds up to the Corinthians, and us, as the perfect model of sacrificial giving, is much more than a model. He’s our Saviour. Through His humbling of Himself all the way to death, the Corinthians, the Macedonians, and us are now spiritually rich beyond compare. Our sins are forgiven. We now enjoy brand-new lives as part of the family of God, and an eternity of joy awaits us.

 Paul said all of this in a slightly different way when he wrote to the Philippians, and so I’ll close with those words so that you can hear it again in a different way, and hopefully take his words to heart.

“Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted Him and bestowed on Him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (2:4-11). Amen.