

Sermon Draft

Text: 2 Corinthians 8:1–9, 13–15

Sermon: “Rich Or Poor?”

Our text for this morning is once again from Paul’s 2nd letter to the Corinthians chapter 8, especially these words in verse 9: ***“For 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.”***

What does it mean to be poor? And what does it mean to be rich? The easiest way to determine these definitions is by measuring money and comparing people. Those who earn and possess the most money are called rich. Those who earn and possess the least amount of money are called poor. That is certainly one way to determine who is poor and who is rich. But is it the most accurate way? Is it what Paul means when he calls the Corinthians rich?

One could also simply ask people if they are poor or rich and have them self-identify and self-report. I am not certain what the results would tell, but I would guess it would not be the same results as looking at data and money.

Some who possess little do not think of themselves as poor, for they are satisfied with what they have. Some who possess much probably do not consider themselves rich, because they want more and more. I wonder if the Corinthians would have called themselves rich or poor.

A movie you might have seen a few years ago: *Captain Phillips* was a thriller starring Tom Hanks about the real life hijacking of an American cargo ship by Somali pirates in 2009. If you saw it or read about the real event in the papers you remember that for a while back, then piracy of merchant ships was a huge scourge off the coast of the horn of Africa. In this incident, four heavily armed Somali men in a small boat sped up alongside Captain Phillips's unarmed ship, boarded it, and eventually sailed off in another small boat, holding Captain Phillips, played by Hanks, for ransom. Heart-stopping action—U.S. Navy ships, helicopters, Navy SEALs getting involved, negotiations trying to free Hanks, and a sudden ending.

As you might expect, the movie rightly, I am sure painted the pirates as the pure bad, bad guys. Only a couple of brief dialogues made you feel at all sympathetic toward them. The pirate leader told Hanks that they were really just fishermen, and since the waters had been fished out, this was all they could do to make a living. Clearly, these men and their families were pathetically poor. But Hanks later says, “You’re not just fishermen.” And he tells them there has to be something better than money and kidnapping. The pirate captain shakes his head, and says, “Maybe in America. Maybe in America.”

Paul writes to the Christians in Corinth, an affluent Greek commercial city, that the dirt-poor Macedonian churches have, even from that extreme poverty, **“overflowed in a wealth of generosity”** (2 Corinthians 8:2). From both poverty and wealth can come either of two reactions: from poverty, either resentment, despair, and grabbing . . . or absolutely unexpected generosity; from wealth, either giving back abundantly . . . or taking for granted what we have and coveting still more. Most of us are more America than Somalia, more Corinth than Macedonia.

But either way, the difference in how we answer God's call to financial giving isn't in how much we have materially. It's in how fully we realize that "our Lord Jesus Christ, . . . though he was rich, yet for your sake . . . became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich" in the eternal things (8:9).

In the Epistle for today from 2 Corinthians 8, the apostle Paul is encouraging the Corinthians toward generosity. He is hoping they'll be generous in the relief and support of other Christians who need financial assistance. In making his plea for their generosity, Paul holds up other churches as an example to the Corinthians. These churches are in Macedonia. Paul wrote letters to at least two of these churches, to the Philippians and the Thessalonians.

These churches in Macedonia were not wealthy at the time. Yet, Paul says that even from the depths of their poverty they overflowed in an abundance of generosity toward others in need. These Macedonian churches were adamant about being generous. They begged Paul so that they could participate in the grace and fellowship of helping others in need.

Meanwhile, the Corinthian Church, which was far wealthier by earthly standards than the Macedonians, needed to be persuaded to assist their brothers and sisters in Christ who were in need. Paul is careful about this. He does not outright command and demand how much they should give. Rather, Paul flatters the Corinthians, telling them that they excel at everything and should also excel in this generosity. Using the Macedonian churches as an example was also a tactic to persuade the Corinthians toward generosity.

Generosity and its opposite stinginess are not determined by how much wealth one has. Generosity is a matter of the heart, a matter of trust, a matter of faith. Paul sees in the Corinthians a danger that their hearts will be stingy toward those in need. Paul seeks to open their hearts to trust in God more than in their earthly wealth, to trust in their Lord more than in their bank accounts.

Throughout history and even today, some people are like the Macedonians. They want to give. They want to help. They cannot be held back from generosity. Some people are the opposite of the Macedonians.

They are like Ebenezer Scrooge in Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*. They are so miserly and selfish that they cannot be persuaded toward a penny's worth of generosity despite being so abundantly wealthy themselves.

But of course, many of us are somewhere in between these two extremes. It seems the Corinthians were. And perhaps so are you. Some people wish they could increase their giving, but when the opportunity comes to increase giving from a raise or a generous tax refund, their mind turns to something else—a home remodel, a new car, or a fancier vacation. There is nothing wrong with these things, but more often than we're willing to admit, these things that serve our own desires are quicker to reach our minds and hearts than the needs of others. Sin has curved us in upon ourselves. This had happened with the Corinthians, and Paul is doing everything he can to bend them away from themselves and toward their neighbors.

I cannot be sure, but my guess is this is why people seem to have an allergic reaction to churches and pastors talking about money. Bending away from one's self toward others is not a painless endeavor. It requires sacrifice.

It requires denying oneself.

Thanks be to God we have both an example to follow and a redeemer to save us from our sins of selfishness and stinginess: Jesus Christ. Paul says in verse 9 that Jesus became poor so that you by his poverty might become rich. Think about that. Jesus left the riches and glories of heaven to come down to earth. Jesus emptied himself and took on our human form. And he didn't live in splendor and majesty on earth. He didn't overthrow Rome and take over Caesar's palace. Jesus had no place to lay his head. He wandered from town to town relying on the generosity of others.

And then, Jesus humbled himself and emptied himself further. He was arrested, beaten, mocked, and sentenced to die. Though he could have risen up in power to stop it, Jesus went to the cross stripped and bleeding to die a criminal's death he didn't deserve. As Paul says, by Jesus' poverty we are made rich. Furthermore, by his wounds, we are healed. By his blood, we have peace. By his death, we are given eternal life.

This generous Jesus suffered the poverty of being forsaken by his heavenly Father so that we might enjoy the immeasurable riches of his Father's grace. For in the depth of his poverty, on the cross, Jesus purchases and wins us from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death.

Now we are his, and we continually live under him in his kingdom, serving him in the everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness that he has given to us.

Like the Corinthians, you may have been less than generous in the past. But generosity is a matter of faith and trust in Jesus.

And you may struggle to trust that God will find a way to care for you as you increase your generosity, but, regardless of how much money you have in the bank or how big your paycheck is, each one of us is rich beyond measure. For we have been given the riches of Jesus' death and resurrection for us and our salvation. That is the only measurement of riches that matters—the riches of Christ for you. Amen