

“Poverty = Generosity”
2 Corinthians 8:1-7
8/23/09

Even when we appear to have nothing, God has gifts for us to use for others.

Affliction and poverty becomes joy and generosity. What a way God has of working!

It's God's upside down way of working in our lives. What appears to be loss becomes gain: poverty equals generosity.

But let's start where we need to.

God's grace is the source of life.

“Grace” here is used to describe God's beneficence. We were enjoying that word in the office this week. Beneficence. God's goodness, kindness, generosity toward us.

You see, here we go again with God's upside down Kingdom. Paul is telling the Corinthian Church about these Greek Christians who are under extreme stress. They have reached the absolute bottom of poverty. They're dealing with affliction on top of that.

And how does Paul start off his message? *“I want you to know about the grace given to the Macedonians.”* The first thing Paul does is recognize where God is in all of this. That somehow their poverty and affliction overflowed into joy and generosity. That's God.

That's our God who makes all of creation from nothing. That's our God who takes a dead Man and says, “no”, life will prevail. That's our God who says that the evil in this world is simply a darkness that vanishes in the blink of an eye in the light of God's love and power.

That is the grace God poured out upon the Macedonians. Because as Paul says, they first gave themselves to the Lord. First, they said, “We are going to believe in this power and accept Christ into our lives so that His life is what we live on.”

So then whatever comes next we know is not the end or our destruction or anything that can keep us down. In fact, now we get to experience God's abundance in our adversity, because that's how God works.

Now listen. This is important.

You have to put God first.

I know we hear that and we have heard that already these past few weeks but we can't hear that enough. Because we rely so much on our own resources and we know how quickly those dry up.

God's grace is the source of life. No, it doesn't make sense. No, I don't understand it all. No, I can't fully explain it. All I can do is tell you I have experienced it and so have countless others.

Rob Bell, pastor of Mars Hill Church in Michigan, says,

“I was having breakfast with my dad and my younger son at the Real Food Café on Eastern Avenue, just south of Alger in Grand Rapids. As we were finishing our meal, I noticed that the waitress brought our check, then took it away, and then brought it back again. She placed it on the table, smiled, and said: ‘Somebody in the restaurant paid for your meal. You're all set.’ And then she walked away.

“I had the strangest feeling sitting there. The feeling was helplessness. There was nothing I could do. It had been taken care of. To insist on paying would have been pointless. All I could do was trust that what she said was actually true and then live in that—which meant getting up and leaving the restaurant. My acceptance of what she said gave me a choice: to live like it was true or to create my own reality in which the bill was not paid.

“That is our invitation—to trust that we don't owe anything. To trust that something is already true about us, something has already been done, something has been there all along.”

Rob Bell, Repainting the Velvet Elvis (Zondervan, 2005), p. 151-152; submitted by Chris Maxwell, Royston, Georgia

God's grace is there. You're already given something priceless: Life in Christ. And so we are called to live like it.

And:

By God's grace your adversity becomes an opportunity to give to others.

Last week my last point was to say that we can and ought to open our hearts to one another. Come alongside someone as God comes alongside you.

That is what this is about. Come alongside someone. You have experiences and insights and encountered God's grace through your adversity. And it is from our adversity that we can relate to others' trials. No, not all the same experience, but our basic human needs and emotions are the same.

The Macedonians' experience was unique unto them with where they were and all that was happening. But when you reach that kind of depth in adversity you begin to know a thing or two about what it feels like. And that opens up opportunities to reach out to others in their adversity.

Believe me when I say that I have seen that here. I know what some of you are dealing with and have dealt with. I have seen some of you I know who are struggling with job loss and financial stress, yet show up time after time to serve and give—and with joy I might add.

I know some of the loss you have experienced, and yet show up at someone's doorstep who is in the midst of their own loss, ready to give in whatever way necessary.

I have seen you struggle with illness and within that open yourself up to someone else in need of encouragement.

Paul speaks of the Macedonians' poverty. For them it was physical poverty. They had barely enough to survive. And yet because they were in that, and because God was at work in their lives, it caused them to overflow in giving to others who also were in need. Because God gave them the heart to reach out.

Someone else's poverty might be something different. Certainly there are those around us who know that physical poverty, and we must do all we can to continue to give. But poverty for someone else could be emotional poverty—completely drained and exhausted from their adversity.

For others it is spiritual poverty. This world offers a lot, and what is gained from it becomes a loss. There is nothing that fills our need for God other than God.

For others it can be relational poverty. They're alone. Not tied to anyone and left to struggle through this world by themselves.

Poverty can take all kinds of shapes.

And so God places you and me where we are in life with all our experiences for a specific purpose. You have an extremely important purpose in life, which is to give to those around you from the overflowing well of grace God has poured out upon you.

It becomes your way of making others rich. No, not in things, but in the love and grace and power of Jesus Christ.

Listen to Paul in **Chapter 6 of 2 Corinthians, verses 3-10.**

“Poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything.”

That’s God’s upside down Kingdom. That’s a power the world will never have nor understand. And we don’t know until we put it into action.

You possess everything in Christ.

And believe me, it is a healing process for you too when you give in such a way.

When you come alongside someone else in their adversity, you begin to experience healing too.

It opens us to God’s presence and power when we ourselves open up to others.

I want to share just briefly a follow up from last week. I shared about my friend Matt’s death when I was 17. Devastating. But then God gave me a gift. A member of the church was a psychiatrist and got all of us youth together. About 20 of us sat in a circle and were invited to share our memories and feelings about Matt.

Some shared some of the deep questions that always surface in such times. I was last to share and I found myself able to speak to many of the questions the youth had, since I was so close with Matt. In my extreme grief, I found myself ministering to my peers. It helped them and was very healing for me.

Poverty becomes generosity as God’s grace abounds. Upside down Kingdom: It turns everything on its head.

In Christ we have it all. *“I have nothing yet possess everything,”* Paul says.

One day a father of a very wealthy family took his son on a trip to the country with the firm purpose of showing his son how poor people live. They spent a couple of days and nights on the farm of what would be considered a very poor family.

On their return from their trip, the father asked his son, "How was the trip?"

"It was great, Dad."

"Did you see how poor people live?" the father asked.

"Oh Yeah" said the son.

"So what did you learn from the trip?" asked the father.

The son answered, "I saw that we have one dog and they had four. We have a pool that reaches to the middle of our garden and they have a creek that has no end. We have imported lanterns in our garden and they have the stars at night. Our patio reaches to the front yard and they have the whole horizon. We have a small piece of land to live on and they have fields that go beyond our sight. We have servants who serve us, but they serve others. We buy our food, but they grow theirs. We have walls around our property to protect us- they have friends to protect them".

With this the boy's father was speechless. Then his son added, "Thanks, dad, for showing me how poor we are."

Living abundantly in adversity: By God’s grace is possible.

“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.” Amen.