

2 Corinthians 8:1-7

“Money MythBusters”

As a preacher who has spent more years in the choir loft or the pews than I have the pulpit, I can remember how I dreaded hearing the annual obligatory “Stewardship Sermon” each year. Making this exact comment on the way to church one Sunday, my husband said, “Well how do we know what the church needs if the preacher doesn’t ask for it? As a church member, I EXPECT the pastor to talk about money. In fact, I think he should do it more often.”

This conversation is pretty indicative of the different gifts that Danny and I have. As a three time Elder at John Knox, Danny has served on Building and Grounds, Administration and Personnel. In my term as Elder, before I went to Seminary, I served one year on Worship and then went on to serve for several years on the Nurture Committee.

This also explains why in my first real job, which was a straight commission job, I was almost starving. I can make appointments – I’ve lived in Greenville my whole life and my parents are both involved in the community, so I know a lot of people. I am fairly comfortable giving presentations. But I would rather walk barefoot in snow than ask someone for money.

So when the Stewardship Committee TOLD me that this was the given Sunday to talk about money matters, I started to dread it early. Luckily, my practical, Scottish Presbyterian blood kicked in just in time and I realized that it is my responsibility as the spiritual leader of this congregation to do some teaching about the biblical principles of stewardship. And in my study of this passage, I found that the Apostle Paul is able to be quite a MythBuster when it comes to reasons we should not give to the church. Therefore, let’s take a journey through the myths together.

Myth #1. ONLY PEOPLE WITH MONEY SHOULD GIVE TO THE CHURCH. Paul is writing his second letter to the church at Corinth – a church he helped start and has maintained a close relationship with for several years. By comparison to most 1st century towns, Corinth is a wealthy, metropolitan city. During this phase of his ministry, he is appealing to all the churches to send an offering to Jerusalem to aid the poor there. Jerusalem was suffering due to political revolt against the Christians and a famine in the land that gave the followers of Jesus a double blow! Paul decides to hold up the Macedonian church as an example. And he does this not because the Macedonian church is wealthy but because they are NOT wealthy.

In Macedonia, many of the generous givers were being persecuted by Rome because of their allegiance to Jesus Christ. Also, small shop owners easily lost business because of their faith and had fallen on tough times. And very few converts to the faith came from the upper class. Corinth, on the other hand, was a wealthy city located on a major trade route. Their wealth came from travelers who did not get involved in their politics or their religion.

Originally, Paul did not even ASK the Macedonians to contribute to the offering for Jerusalem but when they heard about it, they BEGGED to be included. So rather than making the Corinthians feel guilty or asking them to give grudgingly, he reflects on the generosity of the Macedonian church, even in a time when deep poverty was the reality there, thus busting this myth.

Of course, he learned this tactic from the teachings of Jesus himself, when Jesus told his followers about the widow and her last coin. A lot of people would have told her that she should hold on to that coin, lest she need oil for her lamp or bread for her table. But Jesus knew this would have robbed the widow of a great blessing. His story teaches us that WHAT we give is

not as important as HOW we give it. The widow gave out of her poverty, not her resources, and in doing so, received great joy.

This leads to the second myth about giving. Myth # 2 is IT IS UNPLEASANT TO GIVE MONEY TO THE CHURCH. Notice his description of the Macedonians. That “during their time of great affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity.” Here is an illustration that helps flesh out the idea of the joy of giving.

One of the best gifts I ever received was a Mother’s Day gift from my son Carter when he was in second grade. It was a book that he made in school that was filled with pictures he had drawn of me and poems that he had written, with the help of his teacher.

The most precious page is where the children were asked to complete a sentence about their moms. Now at this time, I was right in the middle of my Seminary journey where the third semester of Hebrew was overlapping the first semester of Greek. It was a terrible time! One of the sentences in Carter’s book was, “If my mom had a million dollars, she would buy . . .” Carter completed it with “books.”

The next sentence said, “One thing that makes my mother really mad is . . .” and Carter answered, “Hebrew”. That little book did not cost a thing, but I will cherish it forever. But the best part about the gift was watching the pride on Carter’s face as I read through it and exclaimed over each page. His joy came from seeing my response and was not tied to the amount of money the gift had cost anyone.

Which lead me to think about Myth #3. WE GIVE TO CAUSES TO HELP THEM. Now, I will begin by saying that this sentiment is not completely mythical. I believe we do work at the Soup Kitchen and collect after school snacks for Thornwell and buy extra groceries for The Carpenter’s Table because we want to help them. However, Paul’s message is that the

Macedonians were giving first and foremost to God. He even says as much in verse 5: “they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us.”

This is what makes Christian giving different from any other kind of giving. As followers of Christ, we give first and foremost to our Savior. Our giving is always to the Lord. That is why Jesus reminded us, “When you do it to the least of one of these who are my brothers and sisters, you do it to me.”

Nazareth Presbyterian can be proud of the amount of work and resources we dedicate to our Missions, especially given the size of our congregation. We never fail to have enough people to help at The Carpenter’s Table, enough school supplies donated at Vacation Bible School for local children, enough chili for the cook-off. So if our priority is giving ourselves and our time to the Lord, then we should have no trouble at all giving God our resources.

Years ago, my husband went on a Mission Trip to Venezuela with our church. They went to help build a local church. Each night they were locked into a compound and guarded by soldiers with machine guns to keep them safe. If I had known it would be this way, I probably would have asked him not to go. And the people that they served that week were not only living in constant danger but extreme poverty.

When he came home, he told me that his first thought as they road from the airport on a bus to the village where they would work was this: “How can I have so much when they have so little?” After being there for a week, meeting the people, eating in their modest homes and worshiping with them, he came home and asked me, “How could they have so much when I have so little?” Of course, he was talking about their faith.

These people shared meals with them when what they served the Americans probably cost a week’s wages. They gladly sweated with them to mix concrete and dig post holes so they

could worship together. But they did it for GOD. Not themselves, not those who came to help. When we give to God first, we find that our giving actually helps others in the end. And when our lives are so grounded in our faith, our resources are not our priority. In the end, the poor people of Venezuela gave a lot more to those Presbyterians than they received.

MYTH #4 is PAY YOUR BILLS FIRST AND GIVE TO GOD FROM WHAT YOU HAVE LEFT OVER. It has been my experience that this myth is the most convenient when you are young and just starting to live as an adult in the real world or when you are facing financial issues of your own. In order to understand this fully, we must look at another motivation that Paul had for referencing the giving of the Macedonian church.

At one time, Macedonia and Corinth had been political rivals. By holding them up as a model of giving, it would be like saying to a group of Clemson fans: If you think you would like to donate \$25,000 to this endowment, you might be interested to know that the GAMECOCKS have already given \$50,000! But that is an underlying message that Paul is not so blunt about.

Instead he talks of the grace that God has given in Macedonia and the sacrifice that it has instilled in them. In the original Greek, when Paul says, “extreme poverty” it would be better translated as “down-to-the-depth poverty”. In our modern-day vernacular, we might say Macedonia had hit rock bottom.

Yet because God had been gracious to them, they were able to give. Of course this means their giving is sacrificial. In other words, their poverty did not diminish their ability to be generous. The text literally says that their abundant joy in hitting rock bottom gave them a wealth of noble intent.

Therefore, because they recognized God’s grace in their lives, they had more openheartedness towards their possessions. Sadly, it is often those who have the least who are

most likely to give the most because they understand true sacrifice. The famous minister Charles Spurgeon tells of receiving a wealthy man's invitation to come preach at his rural church to help the members raise funds to pay off a debt. The man also told Spurgeon that he was free to use his country house, his town house or his seaside home. Spurgeon wrote back, "Sell one of your places and pay the debt yourself."

It is easy to see how affluence can well up in generous giving. But how is it possible for extreme poverty to overflow in a wealth of generosity? First, it is because the Macedonians gave not just *as much as they were able* but *beyond*. Paul does not say how much they gave but Paul gives the sense that they determined what they could comfortably contribute and then went beyond this figure.

Finally, if anyone is tempted to make Myth #4 your measure of giving by giving God what is left over, then consider what God has given us. Our only standard to measure God's grace is the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. And in light of that, how can any of us hold anything back?

This week at staff meeting, it was DJ's turn to have the devotion. Before she read, she played a song for us entitled "I will rescue you" sung by Lauren Daigle. Part of the song goes like this:

You are not hidden
There's never been a moment
You were forgotten
You are not hopeless
Though you have been broken
Your innocence stolen

I hear you whisper underneath your breath
I hear your SOS, your SOS

I will send out an army to find you
In the middle of the darkest night
It's true, I will rescue you

Friends, if God will send out an army to rescue me; if God will search for you in the middle of the darkest night; if the Good Shepherd will leave the ninety-nine sheep who are safe and seek the one who is lost; if God will send his Son to die for those who are forgotten and helpless and are broken because they are no longer innocent, then how can we repay such grace? In reality, we cannot.

But when we consider our financial pledge to the church, let us also consider that Jesus laid his glory aside and became poor by stooping down to earth and living among us. He cloaked his Deity in the garments of humanity for our sakes. Paul says that He became poor that you and I might become rich. And what riches we have received in the gift of Eternal life.

Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, “Father, not my will by yours be done.” When he realized that it was God’s will to go to the cross, he did not go kicking and screaming. He went willingly, “like a sheep to the slaughter”. And he did not do it out of guilt, or with a grudge. He did not do it with the power that he had left over after he had lived his earthly life. He did it out of grace. And THAT is our MythBuster. Our motivation for Christian stewardship is our thanks to God for his indescribable gift. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Rev. Julie Schaaf

October 27, 2019, Nazareth Presbyterian Church