

**STRETCH YOURSELF: YOUR GIVING**  
**II Corinthians 8: 1-7**

**INTRODUCTION:**

A week ago, most of us had not even heard of the Dove World Outreach Center in Gainesville, FL. But you surely have by now. Kind of odd, really. The Dove World Outreach Center is a pretty small non-denominational church...about 50 members, total. Their pastor, Terry Jones, is a native of Cape Girardeau, MO and is largely self-taught. He claims to have received an honorary doctorate from the California Graduate School of Theology in Rosemead, CA in 1983 – but the school, which is not accredited, has been unable to confirm whether or not it did actually award a degree to Terry Jones.

As I said, a week ago, most of us had not even heard of the Dove World Outreach Church but we have now. And for what do we know this church? I suspect that some of you were not aware that they are a charismatic church. I doubt that most of you know their street address. Or their web address. I'm sure you do not know what their mission statement is. I'm pretty safe in assuming that since, by his own admission under oath, their pastor, Terry Jones does not know what their mission statement is (but he has testified that they have one).

About the only thing any of us know about the Dove World Outreach Center in Gainesville, FL is that they planned to burn copies of the Koran on September 11<sup>th</sup>. And I guess they are proud to be known for that. That is not what I would want to be known for but that's why we know about them.

Can you think of other churches that are known for only one thing? Christ's Church in Nashville, TN is famous for its dynamic choir under the direction of Landy Gardner. The Garden Grove (CA) Community Church is so identified with its building that most of us merely know it as The Crystal Cathedral. And most of us would not know about the Saddleback Valley Community Church were it not for their prolific pastor, Rick Warren.

Churches in the New Testament were also known for certain specific reasons. The Church at Laodicea was known for being lukewarm – neither hot nor cold for the Lord. The church at Corinth was known for being too tolerant of sin in its midst and chaos in its worship. And the church in Rome was recognized as faithful in the face of persecution.

In II Corinthians 8, the apostle Paul highlights another early church: the church in Macedonia. You need to know that Macedonia was a region, not a city. So the church in Macedonia was actually a number of congregations within that part of southern Europe. Macedonia was the

area just north of The City of Corinth. When Paul wrote his second letter to the Christians in Corinth, he held up the Macedonian Christians as an example for the Christians in Corinth to emulate because they were known for their generosity.

And now, 2000 years later, I am holding them up as an example for us to follow, also. Please hear what Paul wrote about the Christians in Macedonia.

**8** *And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. <sup>2</sup> Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. <sup>3</sup> For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, <sup>4</sup> they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints. <sup>5</sup> And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God's will. <sup>6</sup> So we urged Titus, since he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part. <sup>7</sup> 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.*

So some churches are known for their music, some for their buildings, some for their famous pastor and some for what they are against. But the churches in Macedonia were known for their giving. Would you please notice why they developed such a reputation for generous giving?

#### **OUTLINE:**

#### **I. THE GIVING OF OUR SELF TO GOD'S CONTROL (II Corinthians 8:5a)**

From the year 52 A.D – 57 A.D., the Jews in Jerusalem who had become Christians had a pretty rough time of it.

- The first Christians, baptized on the day of Pentecost, had come to Jerusalem from all over the Mediterranean region. They had come to Jerusalem as Jews so they could celebrate the Feast of Pentecost. But when they became Christians, they didn't want to go home so they just stayed in Jerusalem and enjoyed the hospitality of the Jerusalem Christians.
- In Acts 2:42, we read that these first Christians shared everything they had with one another...until it ran out. Then people began selling their fields and other possessions and allowing the apostles to distribute the proceeds to those who had need...until that ran out, too. Then they became dependent on the generosity of others.
- These Jewish Christians had been ostracized socially and economically by the majority of the Jews in Jerusalem because these Jews, who had become Christians, were viewed as traitors to the faith and to their race. They could not find work because no one would hire them. They couldn't buy and sell in the markets

because no one would do business with them. They couldn't get loans. They faced brutal discrimination.

- Overpopulation had created a food shortage throughout Palestine in about 46 A.D. the effects lingered longest in the cities like Jerusalem.
- And the residents of Jerusalem endured crippling double taxation by both the Romans and the Jews.

The result was abject poverty among the Christian brothers and sisters in Jerusalem. So Paul dedicated much of his time and energy into raising funds to help the starving Christians who lived there.

When Paul wrote his second letter to the Christians in Corinth, he told them he would be coming their way and that he hoped they would be willing to share for the sake of their brothers and sisters in Jerusalem. Then, as a standard by which they could measure themselves, he told them about the Macedonian Christians and he said that they didn't do what he had expected or anticipated but that first and foremost, they dedicated themselves to the Lord.

I'm not sure of everything that this phrase entails. Perhaps it means that they rededicated their lives to Jesus. Maybe it means that they got busy in active service in their community in the name of Christ. Maybe it means something that has not even crossed my mind. But one thing I am sure it means: they gave themselves over to the Lord's control. When they heard of the sacrifice that the Jewish Christians were making just to be disciples of Jesus, these Macedonian Christians gave themselves more completely to the Lord's control so that He could lead them wherever He wanted them to go.

And really, if you want to know the truth about it, the Lord wants you before He wants your money. To Him, money is no big deal. The Bible says that He owns the cattle on a thousand hills and if He needed money, I suppose He could just sell a few head. No, what He really wants is you. And toward that end, the Macedonian Christians are our example because they gave themselves to God's control.

## **II. THE GIVING OF OUR SACRIFICE TO GOD'S SERVANTS (II Cor. 8:5b)**

The Macedonians are also an example to us because they gave their sacrifice to God's servants.

Paul notes that while the Macedonian Christians didn't have much money, themselves (he described them as enduring severe trial and extreme poverty), they "urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints." Some translations say that they begged for the favor of giving to the saints in Jerusalem. And then Paul goes on to say,

*“they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us...”* These believers recognized that their dedication to the Lord also required dedication to the servants of the Lord.

I am very pleased that Clay City Christian Church has a reputation for being very generous in her support of God’s servants who are missionaries. Did you know that 25% of the money that is given to our general fund goes back out into mission work? I know churches that would be thrilled if they could give 10% to missions because 10% is a tithe and they believe that a church should at least tithe from its income for missions. But here, far beyond the 10% tithe, this church gives 25% to missions. That is commendable and I believe that is an illustration of a church following the example of the Macedonians.

I commend this church, not so we will rest on our laurels but so we will take strength from what we’ve done and reach out to do still more. Until everyone has heard the gospel, there is more work to be done. Until everyone who is willing to go has been sent, there is more work to be done. Every member of the Missions Committee is keenly aware of worthy works that need more financial support. Everyone wishes we had more to give to some of these outstanding missions.

I commend Clay City Christian for what you have done and I want to be your cheerleader as we undertake to do still more for the work of the Kingdom.

### **III. THE GIVING OF OUR SUFFERING TO GOD’S GLORY (II Corinthians 8:2)**

As we were working on this message in our sermon workshop, Steve Smith of the Bethel Christian Church, noted the connection between God’s grace and our giving. Paul began chapter 8 by reminding the Corinthians of “the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches.” Then he goes on to describe their severe trials and their extreme poverty. Hey! Where’s the grace in that?

The grace is in their giving; their sharing; their identification with the needs of the saints in Jerusalem. As Steve put it, “When you get any kind of a grip on God’s grace, then giving is not a problem.” The Macedonians could give generously because they had received freely. Oh, they hadn’t received abundant material blessings. They were poor – extremely poor. And they had not received a life of ease. They were suffering severe trials. But out of the crucible of their suffering and their poverty there came legendary generosity.

It is a truism that the wealthiest people are not the most generous. A New York Times study showed this to be true. That study found:

*Working-age Americans who make \$50,000 to \$100,000 a year are two to six times more generous in the share of their investment assets that they give to charity than those Americans who make more than \$10 million, a pioneering study of federal tax data shows.*

*The least generous of all working-age Americans...were among the young and prosperous - the 285 taxpayers age 35 and under who made more than \$10 million - and the 18,600 taxpayers making \$500,000 to \$1 million.*

This information was considered surprising. The study was called “pioneering”. The story was deemed newsworthy. The guys at Time could have asked any preacher and he would have told them the same thing with a lot less effort. Every minister knows that typically, the most generous people in the church are those who have to sacrifice in order to be generous.

Jesus enshrined this principle when he told his disciples about the widow who put a dime in the collection and he declared her lavishly generous because it was all she had. The Pharisee made a loud and lavish offering and he wanted everyone to know it. The poor widow made a quiet and humble sacrifice and only wished it could have been more.

On this subject of grace and giving, may I point out one other observation? This one caught me by surprise. In II Corinthians 8:4, where Paul writes that the Macedonian Christians “urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints” the Greek word for “privilege” is χάρις. Now that may not mean a whole lot to you...until I tell you that it is exactly the same word that is translated “grace”. Paul said that these Christians had received the grace that God had poured out upon them and that they, in turn, begged for the opportunity to “grace” others. The result was that God received the glory and the credit.

When rich people give from their abundance, people will sometimes comment on how wealthy and how successful they are. But when the Lord uses people of modest means, God gets the glory. People are not so much impressed with the success or the wealth of the giver as they are impressed with the God who moved them to such sacrifice.

Are you suffering at all? Do you struggle? I do not want to limit this just to financial hardship: are you agonizing in any way. When you faithfully serve the Lord despite the difficulties, God gets the glory. And God’s glory is His child’s greatest goal.

**CONCLUSION:**

So these Macedonian Christians have been held up as an example of people who stretched themselves in their giving. We can learn a lot from their example.

One observation that these Macedonians led me to is: when it comes to our giving, the first consideration is not what do you have but rather what has you? If your possessions possess you, anything you give will never be enough because it is only a gesture. But if the LORD has you, He will direct your giving so it is always exactly the right gift.

I know I am asking you a very personal question but it is my job to get personal. How is your giving? We give our leftovers to the dog. We give 15% - 20% as a tip to those who serve us. What is an appropriate gift to the One who gave His son to save us? The appropriate gift for the one who gave his best for us is to give our best to Him. He gave His one and only son for us, we must give Him our all in return.

**INVITATION:** #170 (Old Hymnal) – *“Give of Your Best To The Master”*