

“Grace Upon Grace Upon Grace”

(2nd Corinthians 8:1-9)

Pastor Espinosa

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. According to Forbes Magazine, Warren Buffet is the third richest person in the world with a net worth of 72.7 billion dollars. But there is much more to be impressed with. His charity giving is remarkable to say the least. He is driven to help global healthcare and to fight against extreme poverty. No one has given more to charity than he has and he has made known his intentions to give 99% of his fortune to charity. That’s just a little more than a 10% tithe! On top of this, word is that Buffett still lives in the same house that he bought in 1958 in Omaha, Nebraska and pays himself an annual salary of \$100,000 from his investment company. He is unpretentious and very frugal. He is focused on helping people who have been less fortunate.

Something happened last year, however, that might even give Warren Buffet a run for his money! There was this YouTube prankster named Josh Paler Lin who decided to give a homeless man named Thomas \$100.00 to see what he would do with it. Thomas’ first stop was a liquor store, but instead of buying alcohol, he purchased food. And get this: Thomas left that store with that food and started *giving it away* to other people in need! The event reminds me of what Jesus once said in describing the widow’s offering in Luke 21: “For [the others] all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on.” (v 4)

What do we make of such testimonies – through action – of selflessness, care, and love? Where do they come from? How are they produced? In putting the best construction on things while having absolutely no ability to scan hearts, we should take them at face value: they are acts of grace.

It is a conspicuous challenge in Lutheran theology to speak of “grace” in terms of what comes from the life of men. But we come to this eye-opening text in today’s epistle from 2nd Corinthians chapter 8. It has “grace” dripping all over it. The word “grace” (*charis*) occurs with greater frequency in 2nd Corinthians chapter 8 than anywhere else in the New Testament! For example, in the verses we are considering this morning – verses 1-9 – the words “grace” refer to the grace of God and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ in verses 1 and 9; but in verses 4 [the original uses “grace”], 6 and 7, we find this grace as it works in Christians, the people of God. This is how grace works in you.

Not only was St. Paul the tireless apostles to the Gentiles, but he was also amazing in another ministry: the collection of money for the poor, especially the poor in the sacred city of Jerusalem, for the converted Jews who were especially ostracized and persecuted. So what does St. Paul do? He encouraged the Christians in Corinth to give to the church in Jerusalem

and he does so by informing them about the example of the Christians in Macedonia, the region that included the cities of Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea. But their testimony is absolutely staggering and most likely humbling for every one of us here this morning: the churches in Macedonia were not wealthy. They were in fact very poor.

St. Paul says that the Christians in Macedonia went through “the most severe trial.” (verse 2) We may conjecture that “the most severe trial” was produced by virtue of two main things: 1) The Romans in the process of making it one of their provinces in 146 B.C. discovered gold and silver and had no loss of conscience in taking it from the natives, essentially looting their once great wealth; and 2) Civil wars which decided who would be emperor were fought there and Macedonia had been devastated.

And yet, the Word of God goes on to record something absolutely astounding about these poor and ravaged Macedonians: though they were very poor, St. Paul says this at verse 2:

“Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.”

This is such an incredible statement if for no other reason than because it appears nonsensical. How on earth does rich generosity come out of extreme poverty? That sounds like getting water out of a dry well. But the seeming insanity goes deeper. Look at the words at verse 4:

“they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints.”

Know what that means? St. Paul didn’t have to ask the Macedonians to help Jerusalem. Much to the contrary, they begged St. Paul to allow them the privilege of giving to the Christians in Jerusalem! They begged in their poverty to give generously!

It is one thing to speak of Warren Buffet, who will also leave plenty to his family, but the Macedonians were actively suffering. It seems counter-intuitive to expect anything from anyone while they’re down, but all St. Paul could speak of was grace, grace, and more grace.

And this reveals the point of it all: This grace was supernatural, it was after all not from men at all, but from God who raises the dead. Even when Scripture attributes acts of grace as coming from men, it is understood that these have flowed from God. This is to the great embarrassment of modern-day teachers who keep speaking of our good works filling up a bank account in heaven...what a travesty. Our good works are never generated because we are looking forward to rewards and dividends in heaven. They are solely good by grace through faith in Christ. Just as God’s grace has given us life from being only dust; just as God’s grace gives us new life though we were once dead in our trespasses and sins, we are given grace for good works which God prepared in advance for us to do. (Eph. 2:10) These we do out of love for

our neighbor because Christ first loved us. That is, we give grace because we have first received it from God...we are like bridges so that the grace we have received from God continues to travel from us to those the Lord has put into our lives...that's the plan; this is God's way!

And this explains the Macedonians. They understood they were connectors for others of God's grace. To know that you are a connector of God's grace means among other things that we as Christians are called to reject the illusion that what "we have" belongs to us. We are but stewards and a steward does not manage what belongs to himself, but what belongs to his master. My time is not my time, it is God's time. My life is not my life, it is God's life. My giving is not my giving, it is God's giving. But when I fret under the delusion about "my time," "my money," "my life," etc., I do nothing but swim in anxiety...because if these are truly mine, then they are nothing, they are only passing, they are only ending...in this view, these can only deteriorate into nothing since I am only dust. This is the wrong view. This is deception. But if these are from God -- and they are -- then they never run out and we don't have to be anxious about our time passing, because under the Lord our time is eternal and our love is inexhaustible...because it isn't really ours, but God and God is eternal and God is inexhaustible.

But we hold onto the deception to our own great harm. We keep behaving and believing as if it is all ours. When we live in the presumption of our own strength, then patience must run out, then our love must die, then we would only be insane to give to others when we are running out...and if this is what is going on in our hearts and minds, it's no wonder sacrifice seems so hard to imagine. When giving to others seems like an impossibility, then we prove that we're self-absorbed and think way too much of ourselves.

But what about ourselves? What do self-absorbed, faithless people deserve? We deserve nothing. Actually, we deserve a lot worse than that right? But that is not what you get. Instead -- the Lord of grace -- pours out His grace on you and gives you everything! "Everything" you say pastor, but if you only knew how much I've lost!" Ah, but dear Christian I also know how much you've been given! Please read with me 2nd Corinthians 8:9:

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

Christ was more eager for you than even the Macedonians were for the Jerusalem Church; and Christ has given you more than the total of all grace offerings given by men in the history of the world. It is tempting for us to treat the words of 2nd Corinthians 8:9 as an example to us and yes, perhaps there is an element of that, but this is not the primary meaning.

The main meaning is that you and I -- and every other Christian -- has already received grace upon grace upon grace upon grace. This is not grace yet to come, but it is grace that has already -- accomplished fact -- been given and see the words of the Word of God: you have

become rich. The words “might become rich” do not mean “maybe you will, maybe you won’t,” but mean that by virtue of the fact that Jesus the Lord became poor, covering Himself with your flesh and laying aside His glory for you, becoming weak, becoming subject to death for you...this work, this gift, this grace has effected, has accomplished making you rich! The Lord assures you now that you are in Christ so that your provision is so rich, you are rich...you will never run out!

This is the grace upon grace you have received dear Christian. This is yours. It means that you take on a new attitude about your life: it is God’s life and therefore it is a life supplied by God.

If we deny this, if we forget this, then we think that everything is ours and when that happens, we must become grumpy indeed, because anything that is ours is fading; it can’t last. Instead, we have been given a new life – real life – the life that is in Jesus Christ. You have become a Macedonian! No matter how much you give – even when you are running out – your giving is not just from you, it is from God. When you give grace dear Christian, then that grace will not run out, because the grace is from Jesus who bore all your sins.

It is grace that makes us Macedonian Christians! Jesus gave up everything for you – becoming dirt poor and willing Himself to die – so that His riches would transfer to you. The Lord is the King who has draped you in His robe of righteousness that in itself is proof that you are rich and that the grace of God abounds in your life. The Lord has invited you to His feast filled with riches; and by His grace upon grace, you have entered His feast with all the riches of Jesus given to His baptized. He would not give you these things unless it were true: grace has triumphed and it will never die, so dear Christian, you have received grace upon grace upon grace!