

# Excel in this Gracious Work!

1 Chronicles 29:1-22, 2 Corinthians 8:1-15, 9:6-15

November 22, 1998

“Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in utterance, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in your love for us—see that you excel in this gracious work also.... For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.” Here is the starting point, the source, the very fountain of the good news: the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. And what is this grace? Though Christ was rich with all the divine wealth of heaven, though he was Lord and Ruler of the universe, yet he did not despise us in the crushing poverty of our humanity. Instead, he chose freely to set aside the privileges of heaven and to take on all the weakness, all the suffering, and, finally, all the mortality of our earthen frames, giving his life for us on the cross that we might live. And he did this to carry us safe through this vale of tears and to carry us home to the glorious riches of heaven. “Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!”

Now, if this self-giving on the part of Christ constitutes his grace and graciousness toward us, then our being Christian and becoming Christlike, our being more like him, has to do with our increasing grace and graciousness in our self-giving, in our commitment to Christ, and especially in our giving, in our offerings, and in our pouring out of ourselves for God and for his church. This is the gracious work in which the word of God would have us excel. Maybe we do well in believing. Maybe we do well in talking and teaching, in studying and learning, in worshipping and praying, in love and in mission work. Surely this is one of the most loving congregations I have ever seen. Your love, care, and support for me and for my family have been remarkable, and I am sure many others have experienced this, too. Now the word of God comes to us, “Excel in this gracious work.” Just as you are superior in everything else, excel in giving. Strive to be the best in giving. Reach for the stars in giving. Give like no one else before has ever given. “Excel in this gracious work.”

“The point is this: he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must do as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that you may always have enough of everything and may provide in abundance for every good work.” The apostle Paul seems to be knowledgeable of the wisdom of King David,

who declared to God, “All things come from you, and of your own have we given [to] you.” Everything belongs to God. Everything! God has it all. This has two important implications for us. Be sure that you hear both of them together.

The first is that God does not need our gifts. Now, be careful. This does not stand alone. God does not need our gifts, as such, since the whole world belongs to God. God is not poor. God is not needy. God does not need for us to give to God. In fact, God provides us not only with all we need but with more than we need, precisely so that we will be able to give. So God is the provider of all good gifts, not the recipient.

Now, if the first implication is that God does not need our gifts, what is the second implication? We need to give the gifts. We need to give the gifts, not because God needs to receive them, but because the health of the human heart depends upon it. When we give, the heart grows. When we fail to give, or refuse to give, the heart shrivels, shrinks, fails, and dies. The well-being of human being depends, to a large extent, upon giving.

So we need to give to God and to each other. We live in this danger: though at one level our lives depend upon the gifts we receive, at a much deeper level our very lives depend upon the gifts we give away. It is good to eat and drink, to be clothed and housed. For all this we are grateful. And yet, to become too attached to all of this is poisonous and fatal.

What a wonderful world it is! There are so many gifts from God, good in and of themselves. But their even greater goodness and value is their ability to point us toward God, to reveal to us the grace and generosity of our Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer. To get stuck at the level of admiring the gifts would be to miss the whole point of the gifts, which is getting to know the Giver of all good gifts. Our lives are not secured by the gifts. We cannot secure ourselves by hoarding the good gifts of God. Instead, it is by giving that we learn more of God. Excel in this gracious work!

I want to share with you an example about security. It has to do with white water rafting, I am told that there are certain kinds of waterfalls which have a terrific, churning turbulence at the bottom. If you were to fall out of the raft and get swept into this turbulence, it would hold you there and you would drown. The problem is that the life jacket, that otherwise important piece of safety equipment, provides just enough buoyancy to hold you up right in the middle of the turbulence. The only way out of this problem is to slip out of the life jacket, fall through the bottom of the turbulence, and be carried down stream to a point where you can surface. In the struggle to get up out of the water, the very last thing you want to do is to let go of your life jacket. And yet, the only salvation is to relinquish all security, to let go even of the very things we otherwise depend upon, to cast aside all other hope, and to throw ourselves upon the mercy of God.

So it is with life itself. The more tightly we grasp it, the less life we have. The more we give, the more we live. And so it is with the gifts God has given us, even money and wealth itself. God does not need for us to give, but we sure do need for us to give! We need to give freely, generously, outrageously, and even sacrificially, in order for our tiny, shriveled up hearts to grow, to beat, to thrive, to live, and to love.

“You will be enriched in every way for great generosity, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God; for the rendering of this service not only supplies the wants of the saints but also overflows in many thanksgivings to God.” We are led to the heights of thanksgiving, not only when we receive the wonderful and inexpressible gift of the Son of God, even Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior, but when we are carried to that next level of grace and gratitude where we are inspired and moved to become more like our Savior in the generosity of our giving.

Are you interested in this? Would you like to break out of the numbing ordinariness of life and soar into the next level of existence? I urge, advise, and challenge you to give more than you have ever given before. Give more than you have ever dreamed of giving. Give more than you have ever dared to give. Give more than you have ever thought possible. You will find an excitement, a thrill, a satisfaction, a grace of God like none you have ever found before. You will break out of the blinding, suffocating turbulence of life and into the clear light and fresh air of day.

We have six Sundays left in this year, counting today, and we have a long way to go in meeting our budget. We can do it if we want to. Humanly speaking, it is entirely up to the congregation. By the same token, we are right in the middle of our stewardship campaign for next year. The question for all of us is, What do we want to do this year and next year? Do we want to give nothing, or only a little, or do we want to embark on one of the greatest adventures of life and give a lot?

Good givers are not born. Babies hang onto everything. Giving is something we have to learn, and practice, and work at. If you would ever like to be a good giver, if that is even a remote aspiration of yours, you will want to start today. Do not fool yourself into thinking that someday you will get around to it. The longer you wait to start, the harder it will be. Start now, wherever you are, and move forward.

Today we have a wonderful opportunity, not only to receive great things from the Lord, but also to attempt great things for the Lord. We have an opportunity to give more this year than we have ever given before. The alternative, to give less, to keep more for ourselves, to withhold from the house of the Lord, necessarily leads to and involves a shriveling and hardening of the heart, soul, and spirit too horrible to contemplate. Similarly, we have an opportunity to pledge to give more next year

than we have ever pledged or given before. For the congregation to do this, each one of us is called upon to do it. And we can do this with great joy and thanksgiving. By way of contrast, the alternative, a reduction or withholding of gifts and pledges, a turning away from the church of God and thus away from God and away from his Christ, would involve an ingratitude that would be not merely unbecoming a Christian but necessarily and finally fatal. But I trust that we need not dwell on that. Instead, we look to the opportunity and the calling which God puts before us.

“Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in utterance, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in your love for us—see that you excel in this gracious work also.”

*To God be the glory, forever and ever! Amen.*

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