

In 2001, Debra and Andrew Veal entered the Atlantic Rowing Race; they were one of 36 teams who set out to row from the Canary Islands (off the Spanish Coast) to Barbados—a distance of 4700 kilometers. Debra and Andrew were the only married couple to take on the challenge.

About a 1/3 of the way into the race, Andrew was forced to retire—he was suffering from uncontrollable anxiety. He was picked up and flown back home to England, but Debra was determined to carry on alone. After 111 days at sea, she arrived at her destination in Barbados.

I'm not sure what makes a couple decide to row across the Atlantic; surely there were other available vacation options. What I do know is how difficult it can be to finish what I've started—when the initial enthusiasm wanes, there are so many reasons to quit. There are many undertakings that begin with a sense of wonder, adventure, and purpose but when the initial enthusiasm wears off, it can seem to be more pain than gain.

We start our new diet or exercise plan, we purchase a gym membership—or a new treadmill—but before long we are back to our old patterns and the new treadmill becomes little more than an expensive paper-weight. Or we buy shopping cart full of paint, brushes, and canvases, fully intending to take up oil painting, but it's not long before our “painting studio” becomes little more than a storage room for painting supplies.

Maybe you wanted to learn piano but didn't follow through with your lessons. Maybe you've always wanted to write a book, but you haven't got past the first chapter. Ask anyone who's ever tried to renovate their own home—starting the project is a lot easier than finishing it. Life happens, we get sick, we become weary, or other priorities crowd out our initial enthusiasm.

You've heard the old adage, “when the going get tough, the tough get going,” but what about those of us who aren't tough? When the going gets tough, the softies take a nap. One author writes, “People often say they are looking for a new challenge, but often what that means is that they aren't prepared to face the real challenge of staying where they are, working through the present tiredness and boredom, and completing the job they have started.”¹

Finishing what been started—this is God's work, and ours. I want to focus your attention on two different biblical texts this morning—one from the New Testament and the other from the Old Testament. Both texts are connected to the work of God in and through His people, and, both texts have to do with financial giving.

Let me encourage you to take your Bible, paper or electronic, and turn with me to 2 Corinthians 8:7-9. As you turn there, let me take 30 seconds to set the context. Paul is writing to a church that he started in the city of Corinth. And Paul asks this church to catch a vision for the unity of God's people. Though this church is primarily composed of Greeks and Romans, Paul is asking them to give generously to the support of the hard-hit Jewish church in Jerusalem.

¹ N.T. Wright, *Paul For Everyone: 2 Corinthians*, 89.

The church in Corinth had begun well enough—the collection had started well but something happened and things stalled. Paul writes with a twofold encouragement: (1) let's finish what we've started (the collection); and, (2) let God finish what He's started in you (His work of grace).

Please listen as I read, 2 Corinthians 8:7-9, “*7 But since you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love we have kindled in you—see that you also excel in this grace of giving. 8 I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. 9 For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.*”

No matter how hard one tries, true Christian Spirituality cannot be confined to the “religious” dimensions of life—to church on Sundays, prayer before meals, and the occasional good deed done in public. This kind of spirituality is tamer than a pony ride at the fair. Christian Spirituality is like a wild horse, it cannot be tied up or corralled; it leaps over fences, entering every dimension of life.

In vs. 7, Paul lists some of the dimensions that Jesus effects. Jesus effects our **faith**—who and what we trust in; He effects our **speech**—words that we speak; Jesus has a profound effect on what we believe about God, ourselves, and the world (**knowledge**); Jesus extends His

reach to each of our relationships (**love**). There is no dimension of life that eludes His transforming hand—Jesus fills every dimension with His presence and purpose, including our finances (**giving**). “*See to it,*” says Paul, “*that you excel in this grace of giving.*”

We are going to come back to this idea a little later on, but first I want to offer a brief recap of last Sunday's message, followed by a few stories.

Last week Pastor Mardi, talked about the O.T. principle of tithing. God asked that His people set aside the first 10% of everything they earned or produced, as a gift to be given back to God. This offering was given to the priests, who then used it to fund the worship of God, the running of the temple, and to take care of the poor.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus affirms the tithe², but the rest of New Testament speaks less about tithing and more about giving generously. In other words, tithing is seen as the minimum, and generosity is held out as the goal.

Culturally, these are not easy words to digest. The Financial Post suggests that Canadians have reached an all-time high when it comes to non-mortgage debt; increasingly Canadians are living beyond their means.³ In other words, Canadians aren't living on 100% of their income, they are spending 110 or 120% of their income. For some,

² Matthew 23:23.

³ <http://business.financialpost.com/2014/02/26/canadians-on-target-for-record-year-of-personal-debt-despite-better-end-to-2013-transunion/>

the thought of scaling back spending to 90% is enough to cause heart palpitations, or at the very least, a closing of the ears.

Ron Blue once said, “There is never any good economic reason to give. From a human perspective, it doesn’t make sense...because when you give money, you have less of it when you’re done!”⁴ Giving requires an act of God’s grace—He asks us to give and He promises to provide for what we need.

Stories: at this time I’d like to invite a couple people to share stories of how they have encountered God’s provision through giving. First I’d like to invite Judy to come and join me on stage, and after Judy, we’re going to hear from Doug and Jewel.

- Judy Sattler: trusting God with my financial fears
- Doug and Jewel: you can’t out-give God.

Last week Pastor Mardi encouraged all of us to consider committing to the tithe for 6 months, and see if God doesn’t provide all that you need.

As Doug and Jewel said, we cannot out-give God, because God is the One from whom all gifts flow. Let me encourage you to turn with me to 1 Chronicles 29:10-20. At this point in Israel’s history, there was no permanent temple dedicated to the worship of Yahweh—the people and priests gathered for worship and sacrifice in a portable tent. But when David became King, and moved into a palace, he was bothered by the disparity between his dwelling place and place where God was worshipped.

David had it in his heart to build a temple, and he and the people of God gave generously, sacrificially, to fund this holy building project. When David saw the money that had been raised, he broke into prayer-like song—listen to his words:

“Praise be to you, Lord, the God of our father Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Yours, Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendour, for everything in heaven and earth is yours. Yours, Lord, is the kingdom; you are exalted as head over all. Wealth and honour come from you; you are the ruler of all things. In your hands are strength and power to exalt and give strength to all.

Now, our God, we give you thanks, and praise your glorious name. “But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand. We are foreigners and strangers in your sight, as were all our ancestors. Our days on earth are like a shadow, without hope. Lord our God, all this abundance that we have provided for building you a temple for your Holy Name comes from your hand, and all of it belongs to you.”

Verses 10 through 12 come in the form of doxology—a short expression of blessing/praise to God. David blesses Yahweh for binding Himself to Israel, for His greatness, His power, glory, majesty, and splendour.

The reason we worship God is because none compare to Him—He is greater, more powerful, more glorious, more majestic, and more

⁴ Ron Blue, *Master Your Money*.

committed to our good than any being in the universe. As Creator, everything in heaven and earth belongs to Him—He is the King of kings, He is the LORD of lords. Verse 12 reminds us that He is the One who strengthens, protects, and provides.

Here is One we can follow; here is One we can trust.

David moves on from his doxology but he continues to sing his prayer-song with thanksgiving. And let's not forget what prompts this prayer-song: David's words are inspired by the generous gifts that were given for the building of the temple. If ever there was a time for self-congratulation, this was it—*God, you're really lucky to have generous people like us!*

But David's mind is firmly fixed on God's generosity—vs. 14, 16—*“Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand...all this abundance that we have provided... comes from your hand, and all of it belongs to you.”*

illus: I wonder if C.S. Lewis had this text in mind when he wrote the following analogy. He says, I'll tell you what giving to God is like. Suppose a young child comes to a parent, asking for \$20. With the request, the parent poses a simple question: *“What do you need the money for?”* And the child explains that they need the money in order to buy the parent a birthday gift.

The request warms the parent's heart and opens their wallet. A few weeks later, the parent receives the gift the child gives them. The parent receives the “gift” and the “giver” with great joy, praising

them for their thoughtfulness. But make no mistake, the parent isn't \$20 richer—the money was their's to begin with. Is this not what David recognized? *We have given you only what comes from your hand*—whatever we “give” to God is only the act of returning to Him what has always been His.

Francis Frangipane writes, *“Even if all we have is a little, the Lord desires us to be joyfully generous, so that He will have for His church an abundance for every good work. Let us not be selfish or deceived by money. In a real sense, money is not a blessing; it's a test.”* Prostrating our bodies before God in worship is much easier, and less costly, than prostrating our wallets—God asks for both.

Let's get back to 2 Corinthians 8:7, 9, *“see that you also excel in this grace of giving...⁹ For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.”*

“Grace” is one of the biggest words in the New Testament—“big” in terms in of its importance, and, in terms of the ground it covers. When we talk about the “grace of God,” we tend to fix our gaze on the undeserved love of God, mediated to us through the death and resurrection of Jesus. All the wrongs humanity has ever committed—against God and others—were placed upon Jesus (the One who did nothing wrong) so that we could be made right with God.⁵ When we speak of grace, we speak of a love and forgiveness that is greater than all our sin.

⁵ 2 Corinthians 5:21, *“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”*

And so, we may be more than a little surprised at the way that Paul uses the word grace—he makes the connection between the gospel and financial giving. Jesus, though He was Lord and Master, clothed with the splendour of heaven, gave it all away: He became poor, became human, became a suffering servant, He took our sin upon Himself—all for love's sake, *Jesus became poor*.

He became poor that we might become rich—be adopted into God's family, clothed with the Father's love, mercy, and life. Jesus disadvantaged Himself in order to advantage others; He finished what He started, He followed through, He was obedient unto death, even death on a cross.

The apostle Paul doesn't leave this truth floating in the air; he grabs it with two hands and pulls it down into the everyday realities of stewarding the resources God has given us. Every time we give, we re-enact the gospel. Jesus spent His resources that we might have life, and so too, whenever we give financially, we put our resources to work in His service—that people might hear, that people might know, that people might encounter the life that is found in the Lord Jesus Christ. Giving is not our way of doing something for God, it is a demonstration of how much God has done for us.⁶

As we receive the grace of God, may our lives be a more like a channel than a reservoir—freely we have received, now let us freely give.

Worship Response

- *Jesus Messiah*

• *Doxology*

In Romans 11:35-36, we encounter another doxology—it says, “*Who has ever given to God, that God should repay them? For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.*” Let us praise the One from whom all blessings flow—with words and wallets, with attitudes and actions...

Invitation To Prayer

This morning as we've praised God through song and studied His word together, we want to also make room in our gathering for prayer. Our prayer team would love to pray blessing over you, or pray for God's healing in your life—perhaps something I said this morning has prompted something in you and you'd like to mark the moment in prayer.

Benediction

⁶ Scott Hafemann, *NIV Application Commentary: 2 Corinthians*, 343.