

Understanding Wealth and Poverty

5th Sun. after Pent. – 06/27/21 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: 2 Corinthians 8:1-9, 13-15 Pastor Keith Besel

v. 9 [Paul says,] **“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 by His poverty might become rich”.**

Introduction

- ✘ What does it mean to be poor? And what does it mean to be rich? For the majority of people, the easiest way to determine these definitions is by 1) measuring money and 2) comparing people.
 - ➔ Those who earn and possess the most money are identified as the “rich”. Those who earn and possess the least amount of money are then, of course, called “poor”. That’s certainly one way to determine who’s poor and who’s rich. But is it the most accurate way? Is it what Paul means when he calls the Corinthians rich?
 - ➔ When comparing people, consider that an individual in the United States is considered to be living in “poverty” if his/her annual income is less than \$12,880. But in comparison 85% of Africans live on less than \$2,007 per year.
- ✘ Another way to understand whether someone is living in wealth or poverty is to simply ask people if they are poor or rich and have them self-identify and self-report.
 - ➔ I’m not sure what those results would be, but I’m guessing it would be different than what those government figures would indicate. Some people who possess little do not think of themselves as poor, because they are satisfied with what they have. And others who possess a great deal probably don’t consider themselves rich, because they want more and more.
- ✘ I wonder whether the Corinthians in our Epistle Reading today would have called themselves rich or poor?

I. Macedonian Christians vs. Corinthian Believers

- ✘ In his letter to Christian believers in Corinth, Paul encourages the Corinthians to adopt an attitude of generosity. You see, he’s hoping that they’ll respond generously to help in providing relief and support for their fellow Christians who are in great need as they struggle with a famine in Jerusalem.
 - ➔ As Paul makes his plea, he holds up the churches in Macedonia as an example for them to follow. Not only did he write and encourage these people in Corinth but he wrote letters as well to believers in the Philippi and Thessalonica asking them to be generous as well.
- ✘ As Paul says in verse two, these churches in Macedonia were not wealthy at all by earthly standards. Yet, he says that even from “their extreme poverty” they “overflowed in a wealth of generosity” by giving toward others who were in need.
 - ➔ As an indication of their attitude, Paul says that their offerings didn’t come as a response to his request, but instead these Macedonian churches actually begged Paul “for the favor of taking part in the relief” efforts. They couldn’t help themselves. They considered it a great “joy” (v.2) to be able to participate in the Christian grace and fellowship of helping others in need.
- ✘ Meanwhile, the Corinthian church, which was far wealthier by earthly standards needed to be persuaded to assist their needy brothers and sisters in Christ.

- Notice though that Paul is careful about this. He doesn't just command outright how much they should give. Rather, he compliments the Corinthians and the way that they "excel in everything"; in things like faith and speech and knowledge and earnestness and love (v.7), so now he says they should live up to their own Christian standard and excel in this opportunity of Christian charity as well. That's just using good tact and communication skills.
- But Paul is not afraid to do what our hyper-sensitive society today would consider inappropriate, even though it is just being truthful. He uses the Macedonian churches as an example of good stewardship and Christian generosity.
- ⊗ So what can we learn from this? Well, first of all generosity and its opposite – stinginess – are not determined by how wealthy a person is to begin with.
 - No, generosity is a matter of the heart; a matter of trust; a matter of faith. Paul indicates that the Corinthians are in great danger that their hearts might be leaning toward becoming stingy toward those in need. Could they be thinking about themselves first, before they think about the Lord and then others?
 - So Paul is working here to open their hearts as he says the Macedonians did in verse five, where "they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us", that is to Paul and the apostles as they gathered this offering to help out those in need.
 - This is always to be the first object of our Christian faith: trusting in God more than in our earthly wealth; more than in our bank accounts; more than our own desires over that of others.

II. Are we like the Macedonians or the Corinthians?

- ⊗ So, how do we compare today with these two examples from Paul? Well, it's no surprise that throughout history and even today, some people are like the Macedonians. They want to give. They want to help. They can't be held back from generosity.
 - And some people are the opposite of that. They're like Ebenezer Scrooge in Charles Dickens's story, *A Christmas Carol*. They are so miserly and selfish that they can't be persuaded toward a penny's worth of generosity even as they are themselves abundantly wealthy.
- ⊗ Of course, many of us are somewhere in between these two extremes, as it seems the Corinthians were.
 - In fact, many people wish they could increase their giving, but when the opportunity comes to do so after receiving a raise or a generous tax refund, their mind turns to something else instead – a home remodel, a new car, or a fancier vacation.
 - There's nothing wrong with these things, except that more often than we're willing to admit, these things that serve our own desires are what reach our minds and hearts more quickly than the needs of others.
- ⊗ And that's because sin is constantly at work; constantly trying to curve us in upon ourselves. This is what Paul saw happening with the Corinthians, and so he's doing everything he can to bend their vision out away from themselves and toward their neighbors instead.
 - I can't be sure, but it's my guess that this is why people seem to have an allergic reaction to churches and pastors talking about money. Because bending away from one's self toward the needs of others is something that brings a certain amount of pain. It requires sacrifice. It means saying "no" to my own desires.

III. In Jesus we are blessed with immeasurable riches

- ✘ That's why we Christians are so blessed, because God has given us both an example to follow and a redeemer to save us from our sins of selfishness and stinginess: Jesus Christ!
 - ➔ Paul says in verse nine that Jesus became poor so that you by His poverty might become rich! Let's think about that for a moment. Jesus left the immeasurable riches and glories of heaven to come here to earth. He emptied Himself and took on our human form.
 - ➔ And when He did come to earth, He didn't live in splendor and majesty. Neither did He overthrow Rome and take over Caesar's palace. Instead, Jesus had no place to lay His head. He wandered from town to town relying on the generosity of others.
- ✘ And then things got even worse. He allowed Himself to be arrested, beaten, mocked, and sentenced to die, even when He had the power to stop it at any moment. Jesus was stripped and beaten and went bleeding to die a criminal's death that He didn't deserve on a cross.
 - ➔ As Paul says in verse nine, by Jesus' poverty you and I are made rich. 1 Peter 2:24 says, "By His wounds [we] have been healed". Yes, by His blood, we have peace. By his death, we receive the free gift of eternal life.
- ✘ The furthest extreme of His generosity though is this: that Jesus suffered His Father's necessary wrath against sin when He cried out from the cross, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Mat. 27:46). And why did Jesus suffer so? So that we might enjoy the immeasurable riches of His Father's grace, purchasing us back "from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death" (2nd Article Meaning, Luther's Small Catechism).
 - ➔ Yes, now we are His, and we continually live under Him in His kingdom, serving Him in the everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness that He has given to us. That's right – you and I; we in His Church, no matter our annual income; no matter the amount of our personal belongings; we are all RICH beyond compare!!
- ✘ Perhaps, like the Corinthians, you may have been less than generous in the past. But remember, generosity is a matter of faith and trust in Jesus. It is understanding, not the world's definition of wealth and poverty, but understanding Christ's poverty in your place and the riches of His love and grace poured out upon you and into you each and every day forevermore.
 - ➔ And wonder upon wonders, the more we increase our generosity in giving Christ's riches to those in need and for Christ's mission in and through His Church, the more we receive from Jesus again. The riches of His death and resurrection for us and our salvation – they are the only measurement of riches that matter!
 - ➔ His love and His grace; His forgiveness and His presence – these are what make you rich; rich with a treasure that never ends; rich in a way that only makes sense when that treasure is shared and shown with others in contentment and joy. So Christians, let's generously give it away. And let's do it today! Amen.