

June 27, 2021 – 2 Corinthians 8:1-9, 13-15

What does it mean to be poor? And, likewise, what does it mean to be rich? The easiest way to quantify those terms is with money. Those who earn and possess the most money are called rich. Those who earn and possess the least amount of money are called poor. And that's certainly one way to think about it. But is it the most accurate way?

Another method you could use would be to simply ask people. Do you consider yourself to be rich? Do you consider yourself to be poor? And I'm fairly certain you would not get the same results as looking at data and money. Because some who possess very little do not think of themselves as poor. And some who possess much don't consider themselves rich.

I know that experience firsthand. Looking back at my own childhood, I realize now that, by any standard measure of income, my family was poor. My mother was raising three children on a preschool teacher's salary.

But the thing is, I never felt poor. Oh, sure, there were plenty of times that my friends had expensive things that I didn't. The latest shoes. The latest video games. That sort of thing. I might have called them rich, but I didn't think of myself as poor. No, I had a bed to sleep in every night. Decent clothes to wear. Food on the table. Our family was getting by on a shoestring budget, but I didn't know that. And so I never really considered myself to be 'poor.'

Our attitude towards money and possessions can be influenced by many things. One of the key ones that we talk about from the Bible is contentment. Contentment is required of us in the 9th and 10th commandments. It is encouraged of us in Jesus' parables. It is an important spiritual discipline and a gift of the Holy Spirit. Contentment is important.

But it isn't the only thing that influences us. What can also have a huge impact upon us – upon whether we consider ourselves rich or poor – is our ability to see the things of value in our life that go beyond money and possessions. To see not just worldly treasure, but heavenly treasure. And Paul addresses this important concept in our Epistle lesson for today.

In this passage from 2 Corinthians 8, the apostle Paul is encouraging the Corinthians toward generosity. He's hoping they'll be generous in the relief and support of other Christians who need financial assistance. In making his plea for their generosity, Paul holds up other churches as an example to the Corinthians. These churches are in Macedonia.

Now, I'll try not to turn this into a detailed geography lesson, but Macedonia is the northernmost region of Greece, up into mainland Europe, while Corinth is to the south of Macedonia, into the Greek peninsula. There were several cities in Macedonia, but the two that Paul is probably thinking about were the cities of Philippi and Thessalonica. Because these cities had churches that he helped plant. Churches that he continued to write letters to.

These churches in Macedonia were not wealthy. Yet, Paul says that even from the depths of their poverty they overflowed in an abundance of generosity toward others in need. These Macedonian churches were adamant about being generous. They begged Paul to be given the opportunity to help others in need. Meanwhile, the Corinthian church to the south, which was far wealthier by earthly standards than the Macedonians, needed to be persuaded to assist their brothers and sisters in Christ.

And Paul is clearly trying to be tactful about this. He doesn't outright command them and spell out exactly how much they should give. Rather, Paul actually flatters the Corinthians, telling them that they excel at everything and should also excel in generosity. And, essentially, he implies, "Don't let those Macedonians make you look bad by being more generous than you."

Because generosity – or stinginess, for that matter – are not determined by how much wealth one has. Generosity is a matter of the heart. A matter of trust. A matter of faith. Paul sees in the Corinthians a danger that their hearts will be stingy toward those in need. And Paul seeks to open their hearts to trust in God more than in their earthly wealth. To trust in their Lord more than in their bank accounts.

Throughout history and even today, there are people like the Macedonians. They don't see their poverty. They don't think of themselves as poor. They only see their ability to help others. They want to give. They want to help. They can't be held back from their generosity.

While others are the opposite of the Macedonians. They're like Ebenezer Scrooge in A Christmas Carol. So miserly and selfish that they can't be persuaded toward a penny's worth of generosity to anyone, despite being abundantly wealthy. They are rich, but they act like they're poor. They have more than they need, and yet they cling to every dollar like it's their very last.

Most of us are somewhere in between these two extremes. The Corinthians were. And probably so are you. Maybe you've even thought about giving more. But when the opportunity comes – when you get a raise or a new job altogether, a hefty tax refund or a surprise relief from your bills – your mind turns to something else. A home remodel, a new car, a fancy vacation.

Now there's nothing inherently wrong with these things. A home remodel can be great investment. A new car can be very helpful. A fancy vacation can a wonderful blessing. But more often than we're willing to admit, these things that serve our own desires are far quicker to reach our minds and hearts than the needs of others. Sin has curved us in upon ourselves. It pulls our eyes away from our God and our neighbor, and back toward ourselves and our own desires.

I can't be sure, but my guess is that this is why so many people seem to have an allergic reaction to churches and pastors talking about money. Bending away from one's self toward others is not a painless endeavor. It requires sacrifice. It requires denying ourselves.

It requires denying ourselves like Jesus Christ denied himself. It requires thinking of others like Christ thought of us. Paul says in verse 9 that Jesus became poor so that you, by his poverty, might become rich.

Think about that. Jesus left the riches and glories of heaven to come down to earth. Jesus emptied himself and took on our human form. And he didn't live in splendor and majesty on earth. He didn't overthrow Rome and live in a palace. Jesus had no place to lay his head. He wandered from town to town relying on the generosity of others.

And then, Jesus humbled himself and emptied himself further. He was arrested, beaten, mocked, and sentenced to die. Though he could have risen up in power to stop it, Jesus went to the cross stripped and bleeding to die a criminal's death. By his wounds, we are healed. By his blood, we have peace. By his death, we are given eternal life. By Jesus' poverty, we are made rich.

Jesus suffered the poverty of being forsaken by his heavenly Father so that we might enjoy the immeasurable riches of his Father's grace. As the catechism reminds us, in the depth of his poverty on the cross, Jesus purchases and wins us 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.

And it's from the riches of God's grace to us through Jesus Christ that our generosity springs. The Macedonians didn't look at their poverty because they were sinless, selfless saints. Nor did they ignore their poverty because they were delusional. No, they were sinners like you and me. And they were completely aware of how little money they had.

They just knew that they had something far more valuable than gold or silver. They had the love and grace of God. They had the Word of God and the promise of His forgiveness. They had eternal life and the resurrection. They had so much more than money could ever buy.

And so they gave. They gave with generosity and compassion. They gave with joy. They were poor, but they felt truly rich. So Paul calls on the Corinthians to give in the same way. He calls on us to give in the same way.

Not because he wants to feel the pain of poverty, but because he wants us to see the riches of heaven. Riches that we will never see if our eyes are always turned in ourselves. Riches that we will only see if our eyes are fixed on Jesus and his love for the world. Amen.