

Fullness of Life as God Intends 2024
2 Corinthians 8:1-4, 9:6-11 Mark 10:17-22

2 Corinthians 8:1-4, 9:6-11 (New Revised Standard Version)

We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; ²for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. ³For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, ⁴begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints—

⁶The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. ⁷Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. ⁹As it is written, “He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.” ¹⁰He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. ¹¹You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us

Mark 10:17-22 (New Revised Standard Version)

¹⁷As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ¹⁸Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. ¹⁹You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.’” ²⁰He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” ²¹Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” ²²When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Are you entirely satisfied with how your journey of faith is going,
and more importantly, do you think that God is satisfied?

and is it all that you want it to be?

Is it possible that distractions might be compromising your faith?

In the 1970's, a pair of reporters with the *Niagara Falls Gazette* investigated and wrote articles about the claims and concerns of families living in the area around two schools, who were experiencing serious health problems, such as birth defects, miscarriages and cancer, in numbers way beyond statistical expectations.

It turned out, the neighborhood was built over a filled-in canal that had been used as a chemical waste dump back in the 1940's.

Then, in the mid-1950's, the city of Niagara Falls,
acquired the land so they could build two schools on part of it,
and then sold the remaining property to local developers.

But no one had informed the residents of that neighborhood
that deadly toxic chemicals were buried under their property,
and so they were completely unaware of the dangers
that they were living on top of environmental poisons.

So too we can be unaware of cultural toxins surrounding us.

Just as the residents at the Love Canal area were unaware
of the risk & danger of deadly toxin pollution surrounding them,
so too we can be blissfully unaware and oblivious of how
culture's influence can endanger our spiritual health
and the faithful authenticity of our walk with God.

As Christians living in this culture of materialism and greed,
we are exposed constantly to cultural pollutants,
to toxins of consumerism and fear of not having enough,
and the way we relate to money and wealth is a spiritual concern
that both reflects and also influences our spiritual health.

Our reading from the Gospel of Mark begins, vs. 17,

*As he (Jesus) was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him,
"Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"*

*Am I doing the right things, or what more must I do
to earn and deserve, so that I achieve eternal life?*

There is a subtle twist and irony to that question... because,
Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem where he will be crucified.
He was on his way to suffer & die, to provide eternal life
as God's gracious and costly **free gift to sinners**.

In the original Greek, the man's emphasis is on the word, "I",
the man is asking very specifically, **what must I I do?**
But it's not what I do, but it's entirely what Christ has done for me.

We might have expected Jesus to answer, "repent and believe",
but Jesus goes much deeper by questioning and challenging
the man's understanding of the word "good", vs. 18~20
Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the
commandments... and He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth."

"Good" as Jesus is using the word
is an attribute that applies only to the Lord God,
for no one can be 'good enough' to earn or achieve eternal life.

However, this is a righteous man who tries to be a faithful man of God.
He is not saying that he has never committed any sin,

but that he tries to obey God's commandments and do right,
but he thirsts for more and wants to go deeper,
for he senses that something is still missing.

That something more in life that he knows he is missing
relates to a Hebrew word, "**nephesh**", usually translated, the soul,
but actually means a great deal more than just that.

Nephesh is the full and inner essence of the person God created.

It is who we are, it's the God-given and God-breathed part,
our innermost precious self, our passion and heartfelt desire,

-- **nephesh is that which longs and thirsts for God, Psa 42:1-2,**

**As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul
thirsts for God, for the living God.**

Jesus honors his search and longing to grow deeper, and explains how to resolve that something more he still
needed, vs. 21-22,

Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and
give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." When he heard
this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

In that culture, what Jesus told him would have been shocking.

Prosperity & wealth were seen as a sign of God's favor & blessing,
and understood as a clear and definite assurance
that a person was on the right track with the Lord.

But looking deep on the inside of this outwardly righteous man,

Jesus saw that God's material blessings had been corrupted,
and so out of love and seeing the condition of his nephesh,

Jesus recognized, shining a light and challenges him,

because he trusts his wealth more than he trusts God-

-- therefore his possessions have become **the chief obstacle**
standing between him and accepting God's grace and Kingdom.

Jesus had looked deeply into the man's inner self and spirit,
and saw that his nephesh was diseased, being blocked and corrupted
by an idolatry of wealth and the social standing it brought,

and that is the point of this story.

For this man in particular Jesus recognizes **the main obstacle,**
that for him, his wealth and his possessions, **possessed him,**
and he was not open to accept and receive what Jesus offered
until he could release what he held clutched in his heart.

But he chose to reject, walk away & not accept Christ's call
or to let go even toward true liberation and life eternal.

Here we find the heart and message of this text.

It's not about his external righteousness or the good he does,
or even if he had given away his wealth to the poor or not.

The issue was the health of his nephesh and his sense of true self,
what does he really trust, how does he determine value and worth?

He is clinging to the external stuff God has freely given to him,
trusting in his own good deeds and God's material blessings...
... and to break that hold, Jesus says to give it to the poor, vs. 22,
treasure in heaven; then come, and follow me.

and you will have

Mark doesn't specify that this man was extraordinarily rich,
it's just that he has more than he's willing to give up,
or to trust that in Christ, God will always provide.

I have always hoped that sometime later on in his life,
that perhaps this man reconsidered, and did follow,
but at this point, the man's possessions, possessed him.

This text asks us, the readers, to consider how we would respond,
and would we be willing to trust and obey, or is something
blocking the flow of grace and our relationship with God?

For our lives can be so over-flowing and packed with too many things,
and all that stuff, all of that baggage can absorb our life,
so much so that we are distracted and drawn away from God,
and so our true and inner life, **our nephesh**
receives too little care, feeding and attention.

We all have our own particular areas of weakness and failure,
our blind spots, vulnerabilities that we usually cannot see.
We all have specific areas where we struggle to be faithful,
particular areas of temptation that frequently trip us up.

We are all blessed, but God never wants us to hold them so tightly
that we ignore or forget that it is the Lord who gives them to us.

And so in that quiet place of our hearts and innermost self,
Jesus invites us by asking, what do you love, more than me?
What am I choosing, what is nearer and dearer than Jesus Christ,
that if put to the test, what matters more to me than the Lord God,
and what do I most fear or refuse to give up and submit to the Lord?

It's the broad challenge of how we choose to respond to God's grace,
and what we decide to do about God's **gifts and blessings of life.**
Jesus places a difficult and stark challenge before this man,
and then Jesus just let him walk away having made his decision.

So too, our walk with God is about making our choices and decisions
for us to believe, to accept what God promises, -- or to reject.

But what God does not allow
is a comfortable, complacent, middle ground of undecided.

And probably materialism and life-control through our possessions will be among our most difficult spiritual battles and struggles.

I find that Paul's letter to the Christians living in Corinth helpful in thinking about my ways & attitude concerning wealth & generosity.

The earliest Christians were mostly Jews living in Jerusalem.

But when a Jew converted to Christ, their family and friends would perceive them as enemies and betrayers of Judaism, and oftentimes cut them off socially and economically...

... which frequently meant financial ruin and impoverished suffering.

Also about that same time, the Apostle Paul

was spreading the Good News out into the gentile world, which was leading to some difficult struggle & conflict.

The first Christians were mostly Jewish and living in Jerusalem and had considerable doubt about these new gentile converts, and whether or not they were really all of the same faith.

Paul recognized this great need in Jerusalem as an opportunity, through which the Church could truly come together as one.

So the Apostle Paul urged gentile Christians from other areas, especially those of the missionary churches that he had founded, to take up special offerings so to help support their fellow believers of Jerusalem, so much in need.

In this passage, written to the Christians living in Corinth,

Paul is hoping to encourage them to give more generously, by describing the generosity of the churches in Macedonia, vs. 2~5,

... **their abundant joy** and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part...they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints— **they gave themselves first to the Lord.**

Despite having far less resources than the more wealthy in Corinth, the Macedonians were remarkably generous and begged to do more, and as Paul pointed out, it was because, vs. 5,

... they gave themselves first to the Lord.

And that is the whole point of faithful Christian stewardship, and that is how we overcome the polluting toxins of our culture of materialism, consumerism and our fear of less & scarcity.

First, God gives to us, then we give ourselves to the Lord.

It's in response to the invitation of God's grace & blessings, that with joy and gratitude we give our whole selves to God.

And that is part of the Good News, as Paul reminds us, vs. 10-11, 15,

He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, **which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!**

Used appropriately, generously and wisely,
our life's resources can serve to honor and glorify God,
and used to accomplish wonderful & incredible mission.

Nelson is an old friend. He's a pastor serving in Ghana,
who has taught me a lot about materialism and spirituality,
and occasionally I've sent money in support of his ministry.

But in all the years of our friendship, he's never written back,
"Thanks Norm, you're such a generous and giving guy,
thanks for your generosity in sending me your money."

But rather, Nelson typically writes, "I thank our God,
for entrusting that money to you, for you to send to me."

My generosity & kindness don't seem to impress him much at all,
but rather, it's all thanks to God and glory to God alone,
because as he sees it, I'm just the middleman, God's conduit,
for Nelson knows, that whatever money I sent him,
that it's really all provision and gift from God.

He figures that God gives me a little extra, more than I need,
trusting me with material abundance, so that I can send it on,
and thereby share and participate in his ministry.

Theologically, that is the reality of Christian stewardship.
We serve as God's conduits, pipes for carrying God's blessings
as God provides us a little extra, so that we can send it on.

Therefore, Christian stewardship is simply passing along
that little extra that God graciously entrusts to each of us.

This is critical, it isn't about trying to earn or deserve anything,
but it's about how we choose to respond to God's gift of grace.
It's about trying to recognize the obstacles
that are blocking our faith & our walk with Jesus,
**and it's about how we nurture our nephesh so our faith can grow,
by choosing our appropriate response to God's gracious love.**