

God First • 2 Corinthians 8:5

When I was a novice pastor in my twenties I experienced a demonstration of Christian sharing that truly upset me. I had preached a sermon about loving God and about sacrificing something important as an expression of love for God. I believed that what I said was sincere but I never dreamed what the response to that might be.

On Sunday evening one of the offering counters handed me an envelope and told me to take it to my office and see what was inside. When I opened it there were two rings, a wedding band and a diamond engagement ring. With the rings was a note from a widow who said that these rings were very important to her but that she was giving them to God as an expression of her love and devotion to Jesus Christ.

I cried. I cannot tell you that I handled the situation especially well. Actually, I really didn't know how to handle it. I went to the woman

and told her I wanted her to take the rings back. She said, "No." She told me they weren't mine to give back. She had given them to God. She showed no regret or remorse. In fact, quite to the contrary, she seemed very pleased with what she had chosen to do. She loved her husband whom she had lost very much, but it seemed obvious to me that she loved Jesus Christ even more.

Those rings sat in the church office for more than a year. I kept thinking that she would change her mind. I knew that she didn't have very much money and I knew that the rings had a far greater sentimental and romantic value than they had a monetary value. Finally someone took them to a local jewelry store, had them appraised and asked the jeweler if he would buy them. They were worth very little. I never wanted that dear widow to find out. I wished that they had been worth a million dollars and I could have told her that the

large sum of money that they produced did some very great good. The truth was that they were worth less than a hundred dollars.

She taught me a memorable lesson about sharing. I discovered in her one of the most generous sharers that I have ever met in my life. I saw in her a woman who truly loved God with all of her heart. I think she gave one of the largest gifts that I have ever known about.

That widow in Colorado was a Christian sharer. She was like those marvelous Macedonians St. Paul wrote about in the New Testament in II Corinthians 8:1-5.

And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches.

... there is no essential connection between the joy of life and the circumstances of life.

Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify

that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints. And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God's will.

At its peak Macedonia was the home and capital of the empire of Alexander the Great. But by the first century, when the New Testament was written, that had all changed. Macedonia was no longer the headquarters of a great empire but merely a province of the new and stronger Roman Empire. The sketchy information that we have about the first century says that Macedonia was a difficult place to live – with serious problems and severe poverty.

The words that we read here were written by St. Paul to the Corinthians who also lived on the

Greek peninsula to the south of Macedonia. Paul was writing to them about Christian sharing and used the Macedonian Christians as a marvelous example.

He said that they had severe trials but their joy was overflowing. He was teaching that there is no essential connection between the joy of life and the circumstances of life. These people were going through the greatest of difficulties and yet they were full of joy anyway.

Paul wrote that they had extreme poverty yet great generosity. That may seem to be something of a conflict that here they were in what was the worst of economic times — a great depression — yet they were very generous in sharing what they had with the poor Christians that they had never met in Jerusalem.

Are you familiar with the Jewish holiday of Purim? Every year Jews around the world celebrate what is called the “Feast of Lights.” They read through the entire Old Testament book of Esther and commemorate the time in ancient Persia when the king ordered all Jews in the empire executed, but God intervened through Queen Esther and saved them at the last minute. The celebration of Purim is part of Jewish tradition to this day. One of the rules of Purim is that no matter how poor a person is, he must find someone who is poorer and give that person a gift.

That’s the way it was with those very poor Macedonians. They were in extreme poverty yet Paul says that the Macedonians gave beyond their ability. There is an old saying that “It is the poor who help the poor” because they are the ones who really know what poverty is like. Somehow God expanded what the Macedonians had and gave them this supernatural ability to share more than they were able to share.

In II Corinthians 8: 4 Paul says, “They urgently pleaded for the privilege of sharing.” That reminds me of the widow with the rings. I didn’t want her rings. We didn’t even really need the

little that they would provide. But she insisted. Apparently Paul didn’t ask the Macedonians for anything because he knew how little they had. But they didn’t have to be asked. They pleaded for the privilege of sharing what they had with others.

The Macedonians went beyond expectations and surprised Paul. We don’t know what Paul’s expectations were but he wrote, “They did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God’s will.”

Those Macedonians were really marvelous. It is no wonder that they are cited as an example of what sharing Christians are like. They knew something that one very successful businessman didn’t know.

Let me share with you his story from Stephen Covey’s best selling book *First Things First*. It’s actually from the experience of his co-author Roger Merrill.

At one of our recent week-long Principle Centered Leadership programs a man approached me and asked if he could share a concern. We located a spot on the veranda overlooking a beautiful lake and golf course, and sat down to talk.

As I looked at the man, I had difficulty trying to imagine the nature of the problem he wanted to discuss. He was impressive — in his fifties, vice-president of a multi-national corporation, with a nice family. He was an active participant in the program and seemed to grasp the material readily.

“I’ve felt increasingly uncomfortable as this week has progressed,” he admitted. “It started with that exercise on Monday night...”

He proceeded to tell me something of his history. He’d been raised in a small town in the Midwest where he was active in sports, a good student, a choirboy. He went on to college where he was also active in a number of

clubs and programs. Then came his first big job, marriage, a child, traveling abroad, promotions, a new home, another child, promotion to vice-president. As I listened, I kept waiting for the problem — some life shattering disaster that must have brought his picture book world crashing down around him.

“The problem,” he finally said, “is that my life is full of good things — a nice house, a nice car, a good job, a busy life. But when you asked us to think deeply about our lives, to come to grips with what matters most, it really brought me up short.

“As I began to think about what really matters most to me, I suddenly realized that over these past years, that feeling, that sense of purpose, has somehow gotten lost. I’ve been lulled by a sense of security. I haven’t made a difference. I haven’t taught my children to make a difference. I’ve basically been watching life go by through the hedges of my country club.”¹

This man seemed to have everything but had not discovered the secret

of those marvelous Macedonians. What was missing wasn’t just sharing because the purpose and meaning of life never comes from just sharing with others — as good as that is.

Sharing is wonderful, but it is not first. God is first. True Christian sharing is really only a by-product of a relationship with Jesus Christ.

The basis for true Christian sharing is a commitment to Jesus Christ. That’s why the New Testament says in II Corinthians 8:5, “They gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God’s will.” “Lord” refers to Jesus Christ. These Macedonians did not begin with the needs of the people around them, even though the needs of the people around them were obviously great. The Macedonians did not begin with giving, as generous as they might have wanted to be. They

began by giving themselves one hundred percent to Jesus Christ as Lord of their lives. Out of that commitment came their sharing and their generosity.

I sometimes wonder, what if I could be very persuasive? Suppose I could convince you to become a volunteer to tutor immigrant children or to help care for and feed the homeless? Suppose I could persuade you to volunteer to work in the church nursery or to teach Sunday School or to be an usher? Suppose that somehow I could stir up enough emotion to convince you to give away a significant percentage of your money or assets to charity or to the church? Suppose I can convince you to share your Christian faith with others that you know at work and school?

Would that be good? Yes, it would be very good. But not good enough. For there is enormous danger tied in to that approach. You might volunteer to help someone who will turn on you and hurt you more deeply than you have ever been

hurt. You may discover that the money you sacrificially give away is not well used by those

to whom you entrusted it. You may be embarrassed when sharing your Christian faith and you might be ridiculed at the office or at school.

Simply sharing and being generous with others is really settling for second best. While it might bring some satisfaction, it clearly is the second best. The very best is to give ourselves first to the Lord. To be filled up with him. To discover purpose and meaning and joy in life because of him so that everything else flows out of this complete commitment to Jesus.

Jesus said it himself in Matthew 6:33: “Seek first his (God’s) kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” Paul wrote about the Macedonians in II Corinthians 8:5: “They gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God’s

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will.”

Do what the Macedonians did. Give yourself to the Lord. Imagine something with me for a moment. Imagine a giant offering plate coming around right now. Jesus passes it in front of you. You take out your wallet and put some money in the plate and he says, “No” and hands it back. You reach into your pocket for the keys to your car and the keys to your home and toss them in thinking, “There, that’s for Jesus.” He hands them back to you. You think it through a little bit more and you take out your checkbook, write a check to Jesus, leave the amount blank and sign it. He tears it up. You reach into your pocket and take out your appointment book, for in many ways your time is more valuable than money. You tell Jesus he can fill it up with anything he pleases. He shakes his head and says he doesn’t want it. After hesitating for a moment you take out the pictures of your family, those that you love most of all, and you place them in Jesus’ hand. With a gentle smile he says, “Maybe later”, and pushes them back into your hand. There is a long pause — finally you push the super-size offering plate out of the way and you stand up and crawl right into the arms of Jesus, giving him yourself.

“They gave themselves first to the Lord...”

Will you do that? Will you choose God first in your life? Will you give yourself to the Lord? If so, will you pray this prayer with me?

Lord Jesus, you are not most interested in what we have. You want us. It is as if we can now see your hands outstretched our way. We dare not put anything less than ourselves into your hands; you desire nothing less than all of us. So here we are. Here I am. I give myself first and fully to you. Be the Lord of my life. Own everything that I have. I mean this. I really mean this. Amen.

¹ Steven R. Covey, A. Roger Merrill, Rebecca R. Merrill, *First Things First*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994, p. 50.

Faith Matters is the Broadcast Ministry of
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