

Sermon preached by Pastor Ben Kuerth on 2 Corinthians 8:1-8 on October 4, 2015 at Victory of the Lamb.

Series: Live Like No One Else
Today's Focus: A Radical Life

"Only Jesus Can Give You a Surplus of Joy"



Last week I had the privilege of leading chapel services for the students from Christ-St Peter Lutheran School. The school is located on the south side of Milwaukee in a diverse neighborhood. Some of you might remember that this is the school where every Christmas the last couple years {pic 1} we've helped them reach out to their neighbors going door to door with the school kids to hand out Christmas care packages and helping teach the kids about generosity, kindness, and the love of Jesus {pic 2}. We'll be doing it again this year too. We do this because we recognize God has blessed us as a local church and these are our brothers and sisters in Christ in the bigger holy Christian church. We are really one church family in Christ Jesus. He brings us all together and through forgiveness unites us in God's family. So we are a church in the suburbs that does not want to forget the needs of people in the city.



Well the reason I was invited to come lead chapel there is because, get this...they've decided to collect an offering for our church. I just want to let that sink in. They from a poor neighborhood in the City of Milwaukee want to give our suburban church, Victory of the Lamb, money to help us build our new ministry center here in Franklin. I mean you talk about humbling. The median household income here in Franklin is \$74,000. In their neighborhood it's \$24,000.



This is a picture of St Peter's Lutheran Church on 8th and Scott {pic 3}. It's a big old church. It's a beautiful church. But the roof leaks. It needs some repairs. In fact there's a lot of work that could be done. Yet these kids are bringing their chapel offerings week after week *for us*. And here's the thing. I'm not twisting their arm to do this. I didn't ask even them nicely to do this. In fact I didn't even come up with the idea. It's something they *want* to do. Actually it's something they insisted they wanted to do even when I pushed back a little bit. Why would they want to do this? Well because **even though they might not have a lot of money, they have a surplus of joy.**

I wonder friends, do you? We're starting a series today called *Live Like No One Else*. And today we're going to see how **Only Jesus Can Give You a Surplus of Joy.**

The portion of the Bible that we'll be studying the next couple weeks in this series comes from two chapters of a letter that the Apostle Paul wrote concerning a special offering for the poor in Jerusalem. It's found in 2 Corinthians chapters 8 and 9. Today we'll be looking at the first 8 verses. I'm going to read them and then we'll spend a little time talking about them. And if you have any questions please text them to me for a sermon Q and A after I'm done talking.

*1 And now, brothers and sisters (So notice right away, in calling them *brothers and sisters*, Paul is confident that, as fellow Christians, the things he's going to be talking about over the following two chapters are things that these people in Corinth want to hear him say because they understand that their lives are not their own. They've been bought with the precious blood of Jesus. So they know Jesus' love personally and they want others to know it too. That's a Christian's attitude. That's why Paul knows the Corinthians will welcome this conversation about generosity), we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. 2 In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. 3 For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, 4 they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people. 5 And they exceeded our expectations: They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us. 6 So we urged Titus, just as he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part.*

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.

So here's what's going on. Paul is writing to the Corinthians. Paul the missionary had established this church there in Corinth. So they loved Jesus there now. They treasured the message of Jesus' victory over sin and death in their place. They were grateful to God for all their gifts and all the ways God had blessed them. And then Paul had explained that their Christian brothers and sisters in Jerusalem were suffering under poverty and persecution. So the Corinthians thought, "Hey, let's gather a special offering for the Christian church back in Jerusalem. They're our brothers and sisters in Christ. We wouldn't have even heard about Jesus had it not been for the missionaries that came from that church. And sure we might not have a lot of money ourselves, but it's the least we can do. They blessed us with spiritual riches in Christ that will last forever. We want to bless them with our material riches in their time of need. Let's do this."

And at first, the Corinthians were really excited. In fact they were the first church to want to do this. It was their idea. But then you know how it is. Some time passed and their offerings started to lag behind their commitments. Other situations in their own church popped up and they kind of forget about those people far away. Their own needs seemed more pressing. And probably, this happens too doesn't it?, some of the people started to buy new furniture, bigger tv's, and a new boat because of course they *needed* them and the result of it all was that all of a sudden they just didn't seem to have anything leftover for the church in Jerusalem.

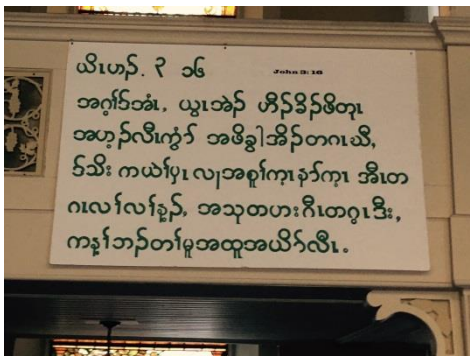
So Paul in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 is writing not to blast them but to encourage them. He's saying, "Hey Corinthians, I know you are struggling with your generosity at the moment, so let me tell you a story about the GRACE that God gave the Macedonians. I started a few churches up there in Macedonia too—places like Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea. They have had it really rough up there. You see when they became Christians, many of them lost their jobs. They were persecuted for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And they became extremely poor. I mean they were using their spatulas to scrape out every last bit of the peanut butter from the jar. But then the strangest thing happened. The more they were persecuted because of their faith in Jesus, the more peace they discovered in Jesus. And the hungrier they got, the more generous they became. It was like they were trees in the dry season when their roots go down even deeper. The more they suffered the more they sent their roots down deep into the grace of God. *2 In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.*

I mean here's what these Macedonians did. They gave beyond their ability. The more conservative financial planners said this was foolish. Yet they begged us to get to be a part of this special offering for the church in Jerusalem. Listen to this, *Entirely on their own, 4 they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people. 5 And they exceeded our expectations: They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us.* It's like they had two shirts and they gave us one of them. They had one bag of flour and they gave us half. They had two coins and they gave us one of them. Their generosity was amazing. And they did this all on their own. We didn't tell them to do this. But this is what happens when people aren't just giving their money but they're instead giving themselves. They realized God doesn't want their money so much as he wants them first—their hearts, their lives, their trust. They realized this opportunity to give an offering was an opportunity to worship God. So their poverty no more hampered their generosity than their persecution hindered their joy."

Friends, what's hindering yours? What's hampering your generosity or hindering your joy? Is it your lack of money or do you feel you don't have enough to be generous? Because here's the thing. Generosity has almost nothing to do with how much you give. Remember the example of

the poor widow whom Jesus pointed out in Mark 12 today. She gave pennies, but it was precious in the sight of God. So I repeat, generosity doesn't have anything to do with the size of the gift. No, instead it has everything to do with the attitude of the giver. If you think you need to wait until you have lots of money before you can be generous then you're never going to be generous. Money has become the idol that you trust in, the false god that you confide in. And so if money is your idol then you're going to live in a constant state of never having enough, never feeling secure enough, and you're going to miss out on what the true God calls an undeserved privileged—the grace of giving.

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.



Why is it called the grace of giving? Because a surplus of joy begins with God. Because in fact we can't even begin to talk about joyful generosity without talking about God who is the greatest giver. Let me show you something {pic 4}. I don't expect you to know what language this is. I didn't either at first. And I'll bet you couldn't even guess it if you tried. Anybody? It's of the Karen people (Karen is pronounced with a short "a" sound and short "e" sound).

Have you ever heard of the Karen? Many of them live in the Myanmar / Thailand border in refugee camps in eastern Asia. Some of these refugees have come here to Milwaukee. In fact I saw this sign up on the side of the balcony at St. Peter's Lutheran Church where I led chapel last week. There are Karen families that attend there. St Peter's actually has a trilingual Christmas service—English, Spanish, and Karen! Unbelievable isn't it? So why I am showing you this? Because the verse that you see in Karen is John 3:16. And the thing about this verse is that it sounds just as jaw-droppingly wonderful in English! It says, *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life* (John 3:16)!

Friends, here's the thing. You and I can't ever out-give God in a million years. Why? Because he is the ultimate giver. He gave us the greatest, most precious gift for He gave us his one and only Son, Jesus Christ. And God gave him for the world. Who's part of the world? Those kids at Christ-St Peter's school. The poor people in their neighborhoods. But also you and me, also the spiritually poor people who live in our neighborhoods, even all the people on this planet—all 7 billion of them and the generations yet to come.

For us all God gave his dear Son. That's why on that first Christmas a Savior was born to Joseph and Mary—a baby boy about whom the angels sang, whom the shepherds worshipped, and to whom the Magi brought gifts. That's why Jesus grew up and ultimately gave up his life on the

cross to unselfishly pay for all our sins of apathy, laziness, ingratitude and greed. No one had to coerce him to do it. No one even had to ask him nicely. Instead he did it willingly, freely, yes in a sense even joyfully so that whoever believes in him shall not perish in hell but have eternal life in heaven.

That's why friends, **only Jesus can give you a surplus of joy.** This week my family and I laid to rest dear Grandma Mabel. The pastor even mentioned this in his funeral sermon—that her nickname was “Crabby.” Except this was one of those ironic nicknames because everyone who knew her knew she wasn't a crabby person at all. She was a joyful woman. It's not at all that everything in her life was easy or that every moment was always happy but that ultimately she always knew that heaven was her true and lasting home because of the victory Jesus won for her and for us all. That's why at her funeral this week we sang the hymn, “I'm but a stranger here, heaven is my home.” It's not meant to be a sad song. It's a joyful one because of Jesus, a very fitting song for the funeral of a “crabby” Christian.

Friends, there is nothing in this world that will ultimately satisfy you, nothing that you ultimately fulfill you, nothing that will fill you up with joy clinging to the victory of Jesus who causes our hearts to overflow with radical generosity towards God and others. Like the people of Macedonia, **only Jesus can give you a surplus of joy.** Amen.