

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, November 6, 2011**

**THE GRACE OF GIVING**

**2 Corinthians 8:1-7**

**DEAR PASTOR**

I want to begin today by sharing with you some classic “Dear Pastor” letters written by children. Here is one from an eight-year-old boy:

Dear Pastor,  
I know God loves everybody, but He never met my sister.

Here is a letter from another eight-year-old:

Dear Pastor,  
I would like to go to heaven someday, because I know my brother  
won't be there.

A ten-year-old girl wrote:

Dear Pastor,  
I'm sorry I can't leave more money in the offering plate, but my father  
didn't give me a raise in my allowance. Could you have a sermon about  
a raise in my allowance?

Another wrote:

Dear Pastor,  
I liked your sermon when you said that good health is more important  
than money, but I still want a raise in my allowance.

Here is one more:

Dear Pastor,  
I liked your sermon on Sunday. Especially when it was finished.

(I thought you would like that one.) I hope you will like this sermon when it is finished. Maybe you will be glad when you hear me say, “Lord, let it be so in us.” My greater hope, though, is (1) that God will speak to you through this message, and (2) that He will prompt you to respond to His Word with gratitude for the tokens of His grace in your life, with joy abounding in His immeasurable love for you, and with open-hearted generosity in giving to support the witness and work of His church here at Faith, the witness and work of the church around the world through the ministries and missionaries we support, and our mission to minister to and care for the needy in our midst, and even in faraway places, as God gives us

the ability and the opportunity. “The needy in our midst” may include a member of our church family going through a hard time financially, or a family in our neighborhood. Thinking more globally, it may include a whole church, a whole community, or even a whole nation devastated by some disaster of nature, or by the disaster of entrenched poverty and a sense of helplessness and hopelessness.

### **THE GRACE OF GIVING**

This message is not about a raise in anyone’s allowance. It is a message about giving. About what Paul calls the “grace of giving” (2 Corinthians 8:7). About giving as a response to the grace God has given us. About giving as a way for us to show what grace in action looks like.

In the last few weeks, we’ve heard messages on stewardship from Mike Chua, David Kern, and Ken Masson. If you’re a member of Faith or a regular attender, you should have received the 2012 Faith Promise packet in the mail a couple weeks ago. If you did not, or perhaps you misplaced the mailing and you hold out little or no hope of finding it, fret not thyself ☺. Additional Faith Promise materials are available at the Welcome Table in the lobby (narthex). You can pick one up and take it home with you today. We plan to dedicate our Faith Promises for 2012 to the Lord in the Worship service two weeks from today, on Sunday, November 20. Some of you have already returned your Faith Promise cards for next year. We thank you for your faithfulness and generosity. And we thank God for you. Between now and November 20, I urge you all to think, pray, read and meditate on God’s Word, take inventory of the blessings of God’s grace in your life, review your personal or family budget, and ask the Lord to show you the Faith Promise He wants you to make, to invest in and support the ministry of Faith.

I believe God has called us here and placed us here to serve the purposes of His kingdom in northern Virginia, to be a place of grace in a world of ungrace. I believe God has put us here to grow together in our understanding and experience and expression of God’s grace. I believe God’s purposes for us are to love Him above all else and with our whole beings, to love one another as Jesus has loved us, and to show God’s love for others in the world around us, through ministries of care and compassion, by sharing with them the message of His saving love for us in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ, and incorporating them into the fellowship of the church.

Giving is one way we show our love for God. It is one way we show our loyalty and devotion to God. Giving is one way we can participate in the work of God’s kingdom in the world. Giving is one way to help spread the gospel and to meet humanitarian needs in places where we ourselves cannot go. Giving is one way to bear witness to the heart-changing, life-transforming difference it makes to know Jesus as Savior and Lord, and to be a part of the fellowship of His church, which, to build on what we noted last week, is a collection of broken people who are recklessly, radically, royally, and relentlessly loved by God. That is what we are – a collection of broken people. Broken in lots of ways, perhaps, but broken spiritually above all. And yet, broken as we are, wounded and flawed as we are, we are the objects of God’s redeeming love. We are the undeserving recipients of God’s tender mercies and His extravagant, all-sufficient grace. Giving is one way to help spread the message of

God's love and mercy and grace in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ to people who, just like you and me, have no hope of heaven without Him.

### **THE EXAMPLE OF THE MACEDONIANS**

Paul was not reluctant or embarrassed to write to the church in Corinth about giving. Times were tough – financially – for the believers in Jerusalem. They were in great need, and Paul urged the believers in Corinth to do something to help their impoverished sisters and brothers in Christ. He urged them to take up a special offering to aid them in their time of need. Wanting to inspire the Corinthians to give, and to give generously, Paul told them the story of the totally unexpected, sacrificial generosity of the Macedonian believers – the churches in Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea. He was just blown away by it. You see, the Macedonians were going through a rough time, too. What they did defied all logic. Paul explained it by means of a double paradox: First, in the midst of their own painful trial, dealing with severe economic pressures, not unlike what a lot of people are experiencing today (maybe even some of us), these Christians in Macedonia were overflowing with joy. They experienced joy in the midst of their own financial losses, a joy that is obviously not dependent on being financially secure. Second, in the midst of extreme poverty, instead of pulling back, they took their generosity to the next level. They did not give according to their ability, Paul said, but beyond their ability. They gave beyond their power to give (*dunamis* is the word Paul uses). They gave beyond what anyone asked or expected them to give.

I am not a mathematician, nor did I sleep at a Holiday Inn Express last night, but I came up with this equation to quantify what Paul is saying about the Macedonians. Here is what I came up with:

Severe time of testing + Joy overflowing + Rock-bottom poverty =  
An outpouring of rich generosity in giving

Maybe it doesn't have quite the same pizzazz as  $E=mc^2$  or other equations that only guys like Matt Libby and Joe Lingeitch understand, but there is something worth investigating here. I think it has something to do with the mathematics of grace, because grace is definitely at work in this equation. Grace was definitely at work in the lives of the Christians in Macedonia. Their giving was definitely a grace thing. Paul recognized it. There was no need for Paul to beg them to give. He did not have to twist any arms. *They begged him. They pleaded with him* for the privilege or grace (*charis*) of sharing (*koinonia*) in this service (*diakonia*) to their fellow believers in Jerusalem. It was an act of grace on the part of the Macedonians in response to the grace God had lavished on them in their salvation and inclusion in the *koinonia* fellowship of His church.

### **THE SECRET**

There was something else going on, too. Behind the eagerness and sacrificial generosity with which the Macedonians gave, and undergirding it, was the fact of their prior dedication of themselves to the Lord, their glad and willing surrender to the rule of God and the purposes of God in their lives. "They gave themselves first to the Lord," Paul says in verse 5. That is the

secret of their radical generosity. In gratitude for His saving grace in their lives, they dedicated themselves first, foremost and finally to Christ, to trust in Him, to love Him, to follow Him, to live for Him. Which is what we ask you to do before you make your Faith Promise for 2012. We ask you first to dedicate (or rededicate) yourself and every part of your life to the Lord Jesus Christ in faith and love and obedience, to seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, to live for His glory and to serve His purposes. Then, ask the Lord what He wants you to give to the work of His church in 2012.

The church at Corinth had a lot of good things going for it. It had some serious problems, yes, but it was blessed with a lot of gifts. There was no shortage of spiritual gifts in the body of Christ at Corinth. They had it all. Or at least it seemed they did. They excelled in the gifts of faith, speaking, and knowledge. They had lots of passion. They could be wonderfully loving. Paul commended them for all these things. Now, Paul said, just as you excel in all these things, see that you excel in the grace of giving, too (8:7).

The amount of your giving is not the thing that matters most. Just a few verses later, in verse 12, Paul says it is really about your heart. Giving is a matter of the heart. It is “heart-work.” If you give willingly out of a heart surrendered to God, and not grudgingly, because you have to, your gift is pleasing to God according to what you have, not according to what you don’t have. The person who gives the most is not necessarily the one who gives the most generously or sacrificially.

Giving is an act of grace. Giving is a response to the grace we have received from God – grace which, as you know, comes free of charge to people who don’t deserve it and never will. Which is all of us. Giving is a way of showing what grace in action looks like.

This sermon is almost completely finished now. You probably like this fact, and may like it even more when I say, “Lord, let it be so,” and we sing the hymn before Communion. Just make sure you don’t miss the message God has for each of us and all of us today. As recipients of God’s amazing grace, may we, like the Macedonian Christians, give ourselves first, foremost and always to the Lord, and may we excel even more in the grace of giving, to the glory of His name. Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.