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Bridgeway Church
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From Riches to Poverty and Back Again 2 Corinthians 8:9

There is a strange irony that comes to light every Christmas. It is *the odd interplay of generosity and greed*. What I have in mind is how at Christmas, more so than at any other time of year, some people are either *remarkably generous in their giving* or *reprehensibly greedy in their getting*. Think about it. Is it not true that we see, at Christmas, generosity at its best? And is it not equally true that among others it is a materialistic consumer-driven feeding frenzy?

God, on the other hand, has only one purpose in Christmas and that is to give. He gives generously, graciously, and gloriously, and what he gave us at the first Christmas and what he continues to give every Christmas thereafter is his Son, our Savior Jesus Christ. ***Christmas is about God's gift to us of his Son, and no biblical text says it with greater clarity than does 2 Corinthians 8:9.***

But before I explain the significance of this passage for us this year at Christmas, I am compelled to say something about the purpose Paul had in mind when he wrote this to the church at Corinth early in 56 a.d. And not surprisingly, it's all about generosity in giving.

As Christians we face countless enemies to the welfare of our souls, be it pride or lust or bitterness or envy. But few are as powerful and relentless as greed. There's one good thing about greed: no one need define it. We know what it is. We're all familiar with the power it exerts on our hearts and the struggle each of us has to break free of its dominion.

That's where 2 Corinthians 8:6-11, and especially v. 9, come in. Evidently the church at Corinth had taken initial steps to collect money to send to the church in Jerusalem where the people were suffering from famine and poverty. It's not certain that greed was the primary reason they had stopped short of consummating their contribution, but it may have played a part. Some have argued that Paul's opponents in Corinth were responsible, having suggested that the apostle was deceiving the Corinthians while planning to keep the money (or a portion of it) for himself.

In any case, Paul's appeal in 2 Corinthians 8:6-11 is simple: finish what you started; excel as much in generous giving as you do in other spiritual arenas; let everyone know of the sincerity and earnestness of your love for the brethren. As you have been blessed in other graces, now overflow in generosity to those in need.

So how does Paul expect them, or us, for that matter, to deal with greed? What is the most effective counter-attack to this insidious force? The answer is found in v. 9. There Paul directs our attention to the one truth that has the power to liberate our hearts from the grip of greed and release in us the joy of generous giving: ***"For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich"*** (v. 9).

My aim this morning is not to use this text to encourage you to greater generosity, although there's no way to escape its influence in this regard. My aim is to point you to the generosity of God in the giving of his Son. As I said a moment ago, ***Christmas is all about God graciously giving his Son to us so that we might gain him forever.*** So today we're going to look at how Paul describes this incredible, merciful, gracious gift of God.

Three questions need to be answered.

First, in what sense was Christ "rich" or "wealthy"? Second, in what sense did he become "poor"? And third, what does it mean to say that through this sacrificial and generous work of Jesus you and I become "rich"?

Let me begin by combining the first two questions. In other words, I want you to think with me about what kind of “wealth” or “riches” characterized the Son of God in eternity past, before the incarnation, before he became a fetus in the womb of Mary, before he was born on that first Christmas morning. But I also want you to consider with me the ways in which the Son of God became “poor”.

When I hear Paul say that the Son of God was “rich”, the first thing that comes to mind is the incalculable “wealth” of his *eternal glory*. The sacrifice of the Son will have its sanctifying effect on us only to the extent that we are in touch with *the immeasurable splendor and limitless majesty of his pre-existent glory in fellowship with God the Father and the Holy Spirit*.

Nowhere is this better seen in Scripture than in the experience of Isaiah in the OT. Isaiah did his best to convey the magnitude of this glory by providing this description of his experience:

“In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said:

‘Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory!’

And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said: ‘Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!’

Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said: ‘Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for’” (Isaiah 6:1-7).

Although much could be said of this remarkable vision, I want us to focus in on only one thing: the splendor and brilliance of God’s glory.

[By the way, you must remember that the “Lord” whom Isaiah saw in this visionary experience was none other than the pre-incarnate Christ, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, God the Son. I don’t have time to demonstrate this, but all you need do is read John 12:37-41. In v. 41 John declares that “Isaiah said these things because he saw **his** glory (that is, Christ’s glory) and spoke of **him** (that is, of Christ, God the Son, Jesus).”]

We are told in Isaiah 6:1 that he saw "the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple."

King Uzziah, one of the more godly kings who ruled Judah, died in @ 740 b.c. (see 2 Kings 15:1-7; 2 Chron. 26). He ascended the throne at the age of 16 and ruled for fifty-two years. One king was dead, but Isaiah was about to make contact with the King who never dies. One king had lost his power. Another never will. One king has seen his authority pass to the next generation. Another will rule from generation to generation. An earthly nation mourns the passing of its monarch. A heavenly nation praises the perpetuity of its monarch's reign. Uzziah's power was limited and fleeting. God's power is limitless and forever. Needless to say, the contrasts in v. 1 are striking.

The *posture* of the angels reflects less on them and more on the Lord in whose glorious presence they worship. Their *praise* is centered on God’s holiness: his transcendent beauty, his altogether otherness as the One who is set apart and entirely unique and incomparable.

The impact of God's glorious presence is shattering! There is trembling (cf. Ex. 19:18; Acts 4:31) and the presence of smoke (Isa. 4:5; Ex. 33:9). "A recent survey of ex-church members," notes R. C. Sproul, "revealed that the main reason they stopped going to church was that they found it boring. It is difficult for many people to find worship a thrilling and moving experience. We note here, when God appeared in the temple, the doors and the thresholds were moved. The inert matter of doorposts, the inanimate thresholds, the wood and metal that could neither hear nor speak had the good sense to be moved by the presence of God" (40-41).

Please note that in the case of Isaiah seeing God does not produce rapture or giddiness or religious flippancy. It produces terror and self-loathing. Isaiah does not respond with pride or elitism or boasting that he alone has experienced this wonderful privilege. He is undone! He sees himself as insufferably unrighteous compared to the resplendent purity and transcendence of the King.

So deeply aware is he of his sin that he, in effect, calls down the curse of God on his own head. "Woe is me" is a cry of judgment. It is a cry of anathema.

As long as Isaiah only compared himself with other people, he was in pretty good shape. But when he caught that *one shattering glance of God* he began to unravel at the seams. This is no small twinge of a sensitive conscience. Isaiah cries out: "I am lost," or more literally, "I am *ruined*," i.e., "I am coming apart at the seams! I am unraveling. I am experiencing personal disintegration!"

Surprisingly, his sudden sense of sinfulness and personal ruin were linked to his *lips*. He cried out, in essence, "Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because *I've got a dirty mouth!*"

This is important because the one area in his life which Isaiah thought he had under control, in which he no doubt prided himself, because of which the people honored and respected him, because of which he was highly esteemed, because of which he had position and prestige was the *power of his mouth*. He was a *prophet*! If there was one arena in his life of which he had no fear or concern, related to which he felt God's most overt approval, which he regarded as his greatest strength and that which was above reproach and beyond falling or failure . . . was his tongue! His speech! His mouth! His verbal ministry! He was God's mouthpiece! He was God's voice, His spokesman on the earth! *Yet the first thing he felt was the sinfulness of his speech!*

At this point, he no doubt felt hopeless.

But here is the good news of the gospel: The infinitely holy God is also a gracious and merciful God! This God of mercy immediately provides cleansing and forgiveness. Isaiah's wound was being cauterized. The dirt in his mouth was washed away as the corruption of his heart was forgiven. He was refined by holy fire. The burning coal placed on his mouth undoubtedly because that was the point of his confessed need, where he knew his sin was most in evidence.

This is but one portrait of what Jesus had in mind when he spoke to his Father of "the glory that I had with you before the world existed" (John 17:5). Paul described it as being "in the form of God" and experiencing eternal "equality with God" (Phil. 2:6). This is what Paul is talking about here in 2 Corinthians 8:9 when he refers to the "riches" or "wealth" of the Son of God.

But it was more than splendor, more than radiant beauty, more than the unending adoration of angelic hosts. It was *joy*! The "riches" of Christ that he so lovingly forsook entailed the mutual and immeasurable delight of the Father in the Son and the Son in the Father and the Spirit in the Father and the Father in the Spirit and the Son in the Spirit and the Spirit in the Son. Each beholding the beauty of the other. Each exulting in the excellency of the other. Their eternal and energetic love for one another is beyond our capacity to grasp.

So, in what sense then did Christ become "poor"? Perhaps we should again let Isaiah make the point. Hear him prophesy of *the humiliation of holiness*: for "he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and

acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not” (Isa. 53:2-3).

Wait! No! Surely there’s been a mistake. Are you suggesting, Paul, that the one at whom the seraphim dared not look (Isa. 6:2), whose glory filled the earth (Isa. 6:3), is also the one who “has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows,” a man “stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted” (Isa. 53:4)? Are you suggesting, Paul, that the one who sat enthroned in power and glory (Isa. 6:1-2) was somehow “wounded for our transgressions” and “crushed for our iniquities” (Isa. 53:5)? How can it be that “the King, the Lord of hosts” (Isa. 6:5) “was oppressed” and “afflicted” like “a lamb that is led to the slaughter and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent” (Isa. 53:7)?

Such was the breathtaking height of his riches and the heartbreaking depth of his poverty. And yet there is so much more to say!

His wealth was seen in the indescribable *intimacy* that he shared with the Heavenly Father, a love and unity that transcend all the adjectives and superlatives in the English language to describe, a depth of commitment and joy and delight one in the other that the human mind can only imagine.

His poverty was seen in the ominous and mysterious cry of *abandonment* on the cross: “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”

His wealth was found in the *ceaseless adoration* of the angelic hosts, always and ever surrounding the throne and filling the galaxies with the praise of the Father, Son, and Spirit.

His poverty was seen in the *mocking, derisive, sarcastic, cynical and degrading voices* of those who called for his scourging and crucifixion. His poverty was seen in that his ears were filled not with songs of celebration and honor and adoration but with taunting and arrogant challenges to come down from the cross and angry denunciations of his claims to be the Son of God incarnate.

His wealth was found in the *unhindered and unlimited exercise of his omnipotent power* in ruling over the universe, in calling every star into existence and saying to it: Be! Stay! His wealth was seen in his sovereignty over every particle of being, from the most minuscule sub-atomic particle to the massive galaxies that fill the universe.

His poverty was manifest in his *weakness* as a babe, finding nourishment at Mary’s breast and depending each moment on the strong arms of his mother and his adoptive father Joseph.

His wealth was manifest in his *omniscience*, his endless and utterly exhaustive knowledge of everything that is and all that might be. His wisdom and insight and comprehensive grasp of every puzzle and problem, his intuitive and immediate understanding of every mystery of creation.

His poverty was manifest in that as a young man *he grew in wisdom and in understanding* and he learned as did any other human being who walked the earth. His poverty is revealed in the fact that this one who held in his mind every datum of information ever possible from eternity past into eternity future had to learn his ABC’s and his multiplication tables and how to tie up his sandals and comb his hair and brush his teeth.

His wealth consisted in his *unrivaled authority* over the angelic hosts and all that was. His word was never questioned, his commands never resisted, his will never thwarted.

Yet his poverty was revealed so very clearly when *his words were twisted* and made to say what he never meant, when *his commands were ridiculed* as the delusions of a messianic pretender, when his authority was trampled underfoot and his will cast aside as of no account.

His wealth was manifest in the *eye-popping brilliance of glory* that shone all around, the paralyzing power of his majesty, the majestic and breathtaking and scintillating shine of the beauty of his attributes.

His poverty was revealed in *the human spit that dripped from his beard* as his enemies spat upon him and beat his face bloody and bruised. His poverty was seen in that this one who was of such eternal and intrinsic worth and inestimable value was sold by a friend for a mere 30 pieces of silver.

His wealth was seen in his *unfettered freedom*, his self-sufficiency in accomplishing all his will, his unhindered liberty to pursue all he pleased.

His poverty was revealed in *his being betrayed with a kiss* and bound by Roman chains and dragged off to be scourged and tortured.

You want to know in what sense he was rich and in what sense he became poor? Consider this:

the untouchable and unapproachable One became touchable!
 eternal life experienced temporal death!
 the unlimited became limited!
 the infinite became finite!
 the immutable became mutable!
 the unbreakable became fragile!
 the independent became dependent!
 the almighty became weak!
 the loved One became the hated enemy!
 the exalted One was humbled!
 glory was subjected to shame!
 fame turned into obscurity!
 he went from inexpressible joy to tears of unimaginable grief!
 from a throne to a cross!
 from ruler to being ruled!
 from power to weakness!

And this . . . ***“for your sake”***, said Paul to the Corinthians. Yes, and for ***our*** sake as well, that you and I “by his poverty might become rich” (v. 9).

“Rich”? In what sense have we become wealthy through his poverty? Refuse to tolerate the spiritually sick and perverted claims of the prosperity “gospel” that would find here a reference to material gain. Our riches and wealth are the sort that cannot be earned by effort or secured at a sale. They are the gift of sovereign grace.

Where does one begin to enumerate them? Election before the foundation of the world? **Yes!** Forgiveness of sins? **Yes!** Adoption into the family of God? **Yes!** Justification by faith alone? **Yes!** Union with Christ? **Yes!** The permanent indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit? **Yes!** Did not Paul assure the Ephesians that God has “blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places” (Eph. 1:4)? **Yes!**

And above all else, ***the richest and most precious blessing of all . . . is God himself!*** He is our inestimable treasure. Beholding his beauty is our inheritance. Enjoying his excellency is our wealth.

And all this “for your sake”!

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