

**FIRST THEY GAVE THEMSELVES
THE FIRST PRINCIPLE OF CHRISTIAN STEWARDSHIP
II COR. 8:1-7**

INTRODUCTION:

Some of us have been wondering about the ability of our church to meet the goals we have set in Conquest. I have discovered the secret of success in meeting our goal. There is one thing that if we will do it, it will almost certainly guarantee success in this effort – and I am not talking about one of us winning the lottery. This is the one thing that set the Macedonian Church apart from all the other churches in the New Testament. It is something that was cited by Paul as being at the heart of the success of that church.

You may not be that familiar with the Macedonian Church for it is usually referred to as the church at Philippi. The letter that bears the name Philippians was addressed to the church at Philippi, the Macedonian Church. Paul holds this group of believers up as an example to motivate the Corinthian Christians to greater efforts in their giving. He indicated to the Corinthians that this was a church that excelled in stewardship even though its was going through terrible economic times. He writes, “Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.” And then he indicates that this church not only gave but they insisted that they have the privilege of giving. Evidently, Paul was reluctant to ask them for an offering because what he understood to be their dire circumstances. He writes, “Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints.” They did more than anyone ever expected them to do.

What was that one thing that meant the difference for the Macedonian Christians? What is that one thing that if we would do it, it would open the door to success for us as the people of God? It is found in this descriptive word from the Apostle, “But they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God’s will.” The one thing that would make the greatest difference is the giving of self to the Lord. Giving does not begin with money but rather it begins with life. These Macedonian believers dedicated their total lives to the Lord Jesus Christ. Their generosity in stewardship was only an evidence that they had first given themselves to the Lord.

I want us to consider this action on the part of the Macedonians. These words of the Apostle have searched my heart all week. I have not been able to escape them. I want the Lord to use them to search each of us this morning like they have searched me throughout the week. They have haunted me as they have asked of me, “D.L., have you given your self totally to the Lord?”

I. COMPLETE DEDICATION OF LIFE IS A PRODUCT OF GRACE.

This paragraphs beings with a statement that lets us understand why the Macedonian Christians did what they did. “And now brothers we want you to know about the grace that God has given to the Macedonian churches.” The word “grace” is a key to understanding what the Macedonian Christians did. Grace means that the generous action on the part of the Macedonian Christians was the result of something God had graciously done.

1. Grace gives a reason.

The relationship between grace and the giving of oneself in total dedication can be that of motivation. What would motivate you to totally dedicate your entire life to the Lord God? Surely if anything would motivate you to dedicate your entire life to God it would be a comprehension of greatness of God's grace that brought you salvation. If we could ever comprehend grace-what it cost God to give us salvation and what that salvation means-we would freely and voluntarily desire to dedicate ourselves to the Lord God completely. Grace gives birth to gratitude. Gratitude gives birth to dedication of life.

The Apostle will use this same word "grace" several times in this passage. In some of the statements it has reference to the outward manifestation that inward grace brings about. But here the Apostle is pointing back to the point of origin for the generosity on the part of these Macedonian Christians. The point of origin is the saving grace of our sovereign Lord.

2. Grace gives a desire.

When the grace of God does its work in a human heart, it transforms that heart. It changes the desire of that heart. While in our sinful state our natural inclination is to save ourselves and protect ourselves when the grace of God has done its work in our hearts our natural desire becomes to give ourselves in worship and in love.

Another way of saying this is that the Holy Spirit changes the disposition within and gives us a desire to give ourselves to the Lord. The word grace in this statement represents all that the Holy Spirit does as an expression of the love of God to bring us to the total dedication of our lives to our God and Savior.

II. COMPLETE DEDICATION OF LIFE IS THE WILL OF GOD FOR US.

The Apostle makes this connection clear in the text. “They gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God’s will.” The Apostle is making clear that the act they took was the will of God for them. This means that whatever the grace of God has done in our lives to bring us to this point, it was because it was the will of God.

That term “the will of God” is sometimes confusing to Christians. What do you mean by the will of God? This statement brings us to the very heart of the divine will. The heart of God’s will for you is that you give yourself to Him. This is where the discovery of God’s will begins to unfold in the Christian life. You first give yourself to God.

1. God’s will in creation.

When the creator created you it was with this in mind. God created you to belong to Him, your creator. The Psalmist David stated this so clearly in that familiar Psalm 100. “Know that the Lord is God. It is He who made us, and we are His; we are His people, the sheep of His pasture.” When the creator made us, His act of creation had as its ultimate outcome this giving of self to God. It is embodied in the understanding of the statement “And we are His.”

2. The redemptive will of God.

What God had in mind when He made us His through the death of His Son upon the cross was that we would give ourselves to Him. In the first Corinthian Letter the Apostle wrote to the believers, “You are not your own; you were bought at a price, therefore, honor God with your

body.” Since you were bought at the price of Jesus Christ upon the cross, the logical outcome of that is that you would give yourself to God in total dedication of life. Anything less than that short-changes God’s redemptive purpose for you.

The Apostle made this a basic appeal in the Roman Letter when he wrote, “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God which is your spiritual worship.” To present the body as a living sacrifice is to give yourself to the Lord. One of the early leaders in the Moravian Church came to a dramatic understanding of this truth. As young man Count Von Zinzendorf visited an art gallery in Germany. As he was admiring the various, priceless paintings he was suddenly captured by one. As the curator of the art gallery made his rounds, he noticed this young man gazing intently hour after hour. Finally the time came to close the gallery, but young Zinzendorf was still standing there. At last the keeper went to him, putting his hand on his shoulder and was about to tell him that he must leave when he saw the tears streaming down the young man’s cheeks. There in front of Count Von Zinzendorf was a magnificent painting of the slain Lamb of God under which were written the words, “All this I did for thee. What has thou done for me?” Before that beautiful painting of the crucified Christ the Holy Spirit led this young nobleman to give himself to the Lord in total dedication. Because of this complete dedication of his life to the Lord, he became a strong influence for the Kingdom of God in his day.

We must be clear about this! It is the will of God that each believer give himself or herself to the Lord freely and voluntarily.

III. COMPLETE DEDICATION OF LIFE TRANSFORMS EVERYTHING.

This is the truth that underlies this passage in the Corinthian Letter. The Macedonian Christians were a remarkable example of dedication and generosity because they had put the first thing in the first place – they had given themselves to the Lord. Any attempt to reproduce the Macedonian experience without beginning where they began is destined to failure. We will never get the results that they got unless we follow the path that they followed. We must first give ourselves to the Lord.

1. It will transform relationships.

Did you catch that little expression in the text, “But they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God’s will.” “Then to us” says so much. The Corinthian Church was hesitant about giving themselves to Paul and to his leadership in the Corinthian Church. The Macedonian church had no such problem. They were a constant joy and encouragement to the Apostle. The difference between the two churches is at this very point. One of them had first given themselves to the Lord while the other was still following its own selfish agenda.

Once you totally dedicate your life to the Lord every relationship is affected. You no longer relate to them on the same bases. You now relate to them as someone who belongs to the Lord. This means that His will is the supreme thing in every relationship. The great Methodist minister, E. Stanley Jones, told the story about a little girl called Mary. Mary was caring for a sister-in-law after a severe accident had left her bedridden. After caring for her over several months which involved bed pans, her sense of duty wore thin and she in carrying out a bed pan, revolted and said, “Oh, Jesus, I am sick of this.” And Jesus replied, “Mary, I want to attend to your sister-in-law but I haven’t anyone to do it for me except you, couldn’t you do this for me,

for my sake?” “Oh, yes, I can do it for your sake. That transforms everything.” And it did! Since she belonged to Jesus, it changed her relationship to a sister-in-law who had become a burden. She was now able to see the sister-in-law with all of the problems through different eyes. It transforms everything.

2. It transforms service.

Our service to the Lord will be totally transformed after we give ourselves to Him. Before we give ourselves to Him the things we do tend to be something that will impress Him or seek to gain His favor. However, once you give yourself to Him, service tends to be a matter of obedience and gratitude.

Too many of us are not involved in any particular form of Christian service for this very reason. The fact that we are not involved in some ministry or service may be a sign that we have never given ourselves to Him. Whenever you make your life totally available to Him, doubtlessly He will have some assignment for you. He may send you to preschool to care for little ones in Sunday School, He may send you to the University Center to help with clothing distribution, or Kingdom Kitchen feeding, or any one of a number of ministries that are going on there. He may send you out in visitation to seek those that are lost. He may put you in deaconship so you can be a servant to His church. He might even call you into full time ministry or send you as a missionary somewhere around the world. Those options are all in His hands since you have given yourself to Him first. This is the first thing in life – to give ourselves to Him. Our service to the Lord comes as a result of having given ourselves to Him.

3. It transforms our stewardship.

This is the theme of this passage. The remarkable stewardship of the Macedonian Christians could be explained by the reality that they had given themselves to the Lord. Once you give yourself to the Lord, then everything you are and everything you have is available to the Lord for His service. You have nothing you claim as your own. The house in which you live belongs to Him. The money in your bank account belongs to Him. The place of business belongs to Him. Everything belongs to Him.

The great preacher, Charles H. Spurgeon, once shared a personal experience that illustrates this truth. He went on a mission to raise money for the poor orphan children of London. He came home to Bristol, hoping to collect 300 pounds to support his work with London's homeless children. At the end of the week of meetings, many lives had been changed and his financial goal had been reached. That night as he bowed in prayer, Spurgeon seemed to hear a voice saying, "Give that money to George Mueller." (The founder of a great orphanage in England.) "Oh, no, Lord," answered the preacher, "I need it for my own dear orphans." But Spurgeon could not shake the idea that God wanted him to part with it. Only when he said, "Yes, Lord, I will," could he find rest. With great peace he made his way the next morning to Mueller's orphanage and found the great man of prayer on his knees. The famous preacher placed his hand on Mueller's shoulder and said, "George, God has told me to give you these 300 pounds I have collected."

"Oh, my dear brother," said Mueller, "I've just been asking Him for exactly that amount."

The two servants of the Lord then wept and rejoiced together. When Spurgeon returned to London he found the letter on his desk containing a large amount of money. It was actually the 300 pounds, plus 300 shillings interest. Spurgeon had learned the truth, that when you give the Lord yourself, you give Him everything. The Macedonian Christians understood this.

In the days of Charles Spurgeon there were other famous preachers and one of them was a man named Archibald Brown. He was a gifted preacher, but not a great preacher until the Spirit of God began to work in his heart; then certain things began to take place in his life. One evening , up in his study, Archibald Brown was rather disturbed; for God was speaking to Him. He was so disturbed upon reaching the top of the stairs he suddenly tripped and fell. When he had recovered himself at the bottom of the stairs, realizing that God had spoken to him, he cried aloud, “Lord, anything!”

Back came the word, “Not anything, everything!” That moment changed the life of Archibald Brown from just another preacher to a great preacher. It changed his life from that of an ordinary Christian to a great Christian. In that moment he gave the Lord everything.

I want to be bold this morning in asking you, “Have you given to the Lord yourself? Have you given to the Lord everything?” The secret of us experiencing the favor of God upon our congregation and the blessing of God upon our individual lives is in giving the Lord ourselves. Won't you do that this very hour?