



SERMONS

Living Beyond These Walls

Finish Well

2 Corinthians 8:1-15

November 15, 2020

Rev. Dr. Mark J. Toone

Good morning Chapel Hill. We have a lot of exciting stuff to cover so I want to dive right into our text, 2 Corinthians 8. As you know, Paul's letter was devoted to uniting a very divided congregation. But today we discover a secondary purpose for his letter. Jerusalem...the mother church...was in crisis. The region had suffered a terrible famine which was bad enough. But it was worse for the fledgling Church in Jerusalem because Christians were being persecuted. Famine...persecution...the mother church was suffering. So, Paul had two goals in his missionary journeys to the Gentile world. First, of course, to spread the gospel of Jesus. But secondly, he wanted to take up a collection to relieve the suffering of the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem.

Paul mentioned this in his first letter to the Corinthians: "Now concerning the collection for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do. On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up..." *1 Cor 16.1*

The Corinthians had committed to helping with this collection and Paul was giving them practical tips on how to fulfill that commitment. Then in II Corinthians, he returns to that topic. In the first part of chapter 8, he mentions how generous the Macedonian churches had been...which was all the more remarkable since the Macedonians themselves had suffered great affliction. Listen to 8:1-4:



We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints. 2 Cor 8: 1-4

I can tell you...there haven't been a lot of times when people have BEGGED to give an offering! "Please...please Pastor Mark. I'm begging you...you HAVE to let me write a big check!" "Oh...ok. If you insist." No...not so often. But that's how Paul described those awesome Macedonians. And of course...you know what he's doing, right? He's stirring up a little friendly competition. "Look...the Macedonians...who are WAY worse off than you Corinthians...they have given generously to support the mother church in Jerusalem. Now... how about you?" He continues (verse 6):

Accordingly, we urged Titus that as he had started, so he should complete among you this act of grace. But as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in our love for you—see that you excel in this act of grace also ...

(In other words, you have so many wonderful spiritual attributes. Why don't you add generosity to that list!)...

I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine. 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.

I love the way Paul talks about generosity. He refers to it as an "act of grace." This is not something they HAVE to do. He makes that clear: "I say this NOT as a command..." True Christian generosity can never be compelled or coerced. It arises



out of a heart of gratitude...gratitude for the fact that Jesus, who had everything, gave it all up and became poor for our sakes...so that WE might become rich in every way that matters. THAT right there is the motivation for Christian giving. God gave his Son for us. Jesus gave up everything for us. How can we respond with anything but generosity...?

Then Paul concludes: "...you, who a year ago started not only to do this work but also to desire to do it...now finish doing it as well..." In other words, Paul says, "A year ago you were inspired to make a free-will pledge to help the Jerusalem saints... which was wonderful. Now, I'm asking you to finish what you started. Finish well!"

Paul is doing two things. He is bragging on the generosity of the Macedonians...and he is urging the Corinthians to finish what they started. It is the perfect text for this moment in our life as a church, because I want to do both those things. First...I want to brag on you...and then, I want to urge you to finish well.

As you know...I'm a brand-new grandpa. I suspect that I will be doing a lot of bragging in that new role. But I've had a lot of practice...because you, my Sweetheart Church, have given me good reason to brag for more than 30 years. Let's take a trip down memory lane, shall we? For our guests...I realize this is all new to you. But if you are considering making Chapel Hill your church home, this will give you a glimpse into the generous, giving nature of this congregation. OK...audience participation...

Who was here May 31, 1992...the ribbon-cutting of our new gymnasium? We desperately needed a larger sanctuary but we realized there was an even greater need in our community. In 1992, there was NO PLACE for kids to play outside of school: No YMCA. No Boys and Girls Club. Nothing. Your church parents decided the community's need for kids' space trumped our need for a larger sanctuary... so we built the gym first. We raised some money, took on a mortgage...and got started...



because the need was great ...and we had faith that others would follow who would help us pay off that debt.

Who was here November 23, 1997, the ribbon-cutting for our sanctuary? It seated 1500 people. We didn't need that much space...not even close. But we believed God would continue to grow us. Even more, there was NO PLACE in Gig Harbor for large community events: plays, concerts, graduations, Baccalaureates. So we built a bigger sanctuary than we needed so we could share with our community. We raised some money, took on a larger mortgage...and got started...because the need was great ...and we had faith that others would follow who would help us pay off that debt.

Who was here July 31, 2005, the ribbon-cutting for our Gathering Place and youth center? We needed a place for fellowship...AND there was NO PLACE in Gig Harbor where 400 people could gather for a meal. So we built a Gathering Place to share with our community. We raised some money, took on a larger mortgage...and got started, because the need was great....and we had faith that others would follow who would help us pay off that debt.

OK...here are the numbers. Brace yourself. In total, we invested almost \$16 million in buildings PLUS \$1.3 million in land purchases...a total of more than \$17 million in facilities that would serve us AND our community. We paid off \$8 million and took on a mortgage of \$9 million which cost us \$581,000 per year to service. And then...we made plans to pay off that debt.

But experts told us it would be the hardest campaign we'd ever run. Paying off debt is not sexy, they said. In the end, you have nothing to show for it. No new building. No extra land. No enhanced facilities. Prepare yourself; debt-reduction is hard work.

But your elders felt differently. They said, "Let's focus on the good we could do with those mortgage dollars; the impact we could have if, every year, we invested a half



million dollars in serving our region rather than paying the bank.” Pastor Ellis came up with the theme: Beyond These Walls. LOGO On June 4, 2017, we placed that vision before you... prayed...and held our breath.

Two weeks later, we had our answer. You pledged more than \$5.4 million...the first time we had EVER hit our campaign goal. I still remember opening that envelope. How many were here? It was one of the most exciting moments in my ministry. I was so proud of you. So proud to be the pastor of my Sweetheart Church.

But here’s the deal. It is one thing to pledge. It is another thing to fulfill the pledge. And so...we waited and watched. Watched as you paid off the first million. And then the second. And then the third. And then the fourth. It was looking good...and then COVID struck. With the plummeting economy, we assumed that Beyond These Walls would hit a wall. We were wrong. Even though we were locked down...even though we couldn’t meet in person for months...you kept your commitment. You just kept giving.

Which brings us to this moment. Would you like to hear where we stand as of today? Remember...we took on a total of \$9 million in debt. Three years ago, \$5.5 million remained. A year ago, \$1.2 million remained. As of today, our total remaining debt is..... \$380,000! You are a crazy bunch Macedonians! Giving to this vision that is focused, not on our needs, but on the needs of the region around us. When we pay down that last 380,000, the money that USED to pay a mortgage, will be redirected beyond these walls.

Here’s how it will work. Our mortgage debt represented 15% of our annual budget. When we’ve paid off the last of the debt, Session has voted to allocate 15% of our annual budget to Beyond These Walls initiatives. 15%...every year. And remember, we already give 10% of whatever we receive to missions. That means that when



Beyond These Walls is complete, we will invest 25% of every dollar we receive...every year...into ministries that go... beyond these walls!

When the debt is gone, we will fulfill a \$25,000 pledge to the YMCA for their work with under-resourced students on the KP. When the debt is gone, we will fulfill a \$75,000 pledge to the Logos Indonesian church in Seattle who had their \$250,000 building fund taken from them by our former denomination. When the debt is gone, we will fulfill a \$100,000 pledge to FISH food bank for their new building. When the debt is gone, we will fulfill a \$150,000 commitment to the Rescue Mission for their life-transforming work. And that is just a sample of what we will do...beyond the support we already give and the 1000s of volunteer hours we provide. A Beyond These Walls team is being formed that will work with the Session as we unleash this incredible wave of generosity with which we hope to bless our region for decades to come.

And this...all of this...is because of your incredible generosity. Thank you! You have given like a bunch of Macedonians. 750 families. Large gifts and small. You defied the experts. You gave, not because of what you would receive...but because you could bless others. As Paul put it, your giving...this act of grace... “overflowed in a wealth of generosity!” So...my dear, Sweetheart Church...thank you! That’s my first message

And, as Paul urged the Corinthians, here is my second: “Finish well!” Many of you have not yet finished your pledge. I know that Cyndi and I just wrote our last check this week. I urge you...join us in finishing well. We have \$380,000 to go...380,000 out of \$9 million! Amazing. And we have MORE than enough outstanding pledges to meet that need. And when we do, every dollar will go toward our Beyond These Walls initiatives.

And for those of you who are new to us since “Beyond These Walls”...or have not yet participated...it’s not too late! You can be part of the fun, too. If you were to jump in



now with a generous one-time gift, just imagine... yours might be the gift that pushes us over the finish line! We have a QR code that will link you to a giving page for that purpose. I invite you...as Paul invited his readers...to "excel in this grace also."

Here's our dream. We believe, based upon the incredible generosity of this church, that we will pay off the last of our debt by December 31. And when we do, on January 3, we are going to celebrate like crazy. It will be the first Sunday of 2021...a fresh start! Who ISN'T ready to be done with 2020? AND...it will be the celebration of a fresh start as a congregation...debt-free! Able to be more generous than we have ever been before. Over \$17 million of construction...\$9 million of debt...paid off. Every last dime. And we will burn our last mortgage on that day...January 3.

I hope that excites you. I'll tell you...it excites me. It is a dream I've held in my heart since 1992 when we built our gymnasium...that we would be debt-free and able to serve our region and our world as never before. For thirty years, we built, we gave, and we prayed for people just like you. People who would finish what we had begun. And now...here you are! You crazy Macedonians! The answer...the literal answer...to our prayers. Praise God from whom all blessings flow!