

To Be A Christ Follower

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[0 : 00] Dave read the epistle, and he's a new dad. I don't know if you folks all know this. Jonathan Alexander at 7 pounds 12 ounces, is it, was born on Tuesday morning at 7 o'clock in the morning. Is that right?

So the Maurydes and the Alexanders have this thing about 7 o'clock in the morning babies being born, which is a wonderfully convenient time to have a baby, I suppose. And congratulations, Anne. I can't see Dave. He's gone out of the room, so you guys can all congratulate.

And I think young Jonathan is here. Yeah, you want to clap? Yeah, we should clap, eh? That's just fantastic. Congratulations. And after that word of congratulation, next, a word of apology, although maybe none of you noticed it, but I sort of flubbed my sermon last week with you folks. Maybe none of you thought that I flubbed it.

One of the things, this is actually a lot of notes this morning. Normally I just have like one page of notes, and I sort of just preach from notes, and so a lot of my sermon is extemporaneous.

And the benefit is I get to sort of look at you a lot rather than looking at paper. But the downside is that sometimes something, when you're being extemporaneous, that means things come into your mind and you say them.

[1 : 22] And I, about a, right early on in my sermon, I said something, and almost instantly I said to myself, why did I say that? Like, I'm preaching to you, and inwardly I'm saying, why did I say that?

And then I tried to fix it and put things in the wrong order, and then I kept trying to fix it and fix it and fix it. And I eventually got sort of to the right order and finished the sermon. But after the service, I asked Andrew if he could tape the 11 o'clock sermon.

Normally it's the 9.15 sermon that goes on the web, not the 11. So normally it's 9.15 that goes on the web, not 11. And I said to Andrew, could you please tape the 11 o'clock sermon?

So if you want to hear how it was supposed to go, you can go on the web page and then compare it to your memory. I don't lose any sleep over it because God is made perfect in our weakness and in our mistakes.

And thirdly and finally, if you ever come to a wedding rehearsal that I do, there's a point in time in the wedding rehearsal where I give the maid of honour permission to ignore me.

[2 : 35] In fact, not only do I give her permission to ignore me, I encourage her to ignore me. Because I say that, you know, when the bride has come up to the front and the maid of honour is there, it's the maid of honour's job.

It's never the best man's job, by the way. Guys just generally aren't good at this. But the maid of honour's job is that every time the bride turns or kneels or sits or does anything like this, the maid of honour's job is to always be sort of ignoring me, looking at the bride's dress and fluffing and turning and doing all that type of stuff so that the bride always looks spectacular.

And so I said, you know, obviously many people ignore the minister lots and lots of times, but you have, in this ceremony, you have permission. In fact, my encouragement to ignore me.

I could be up front blethering away about whatever, but you should be looking at the bride's dress and making sure that it's looking and hanging very nice. And if you are a guest here this morning and you have not come to know Jesus as your saviour, I want to tell you right now that I don't want you to put any money in the plate.

Okay, you have not only my permission to not put money in the plate, my encouragement for you not to put a single penny in the plate. And in fact, as long as you come to this church as a seeker, before coming to Christ, I would be happier if you put no money in the plate.

[4 : 02] And go downstairs. One other time I said this, we didn't have any coffee that Sunday, so I sure hope we have coffee today. But go downstairs, buy some, you know, have as much, not buy,

the coffee's free, have as much coffee as you want.

You're our guest. We don't have visitors in this church. We only have guests. And as you're going to see in a moment in the sermon, the offering plate is for Christians.

And in particular, it's for those Christians who call St. Albans their church home. The offering plate's not for people who have not yet come to know Christ. So because I'm going to be talking about money today, I want you to, this is my opportunity to sort of say, please don't put any money in the plate.

What does it mean to follow Jesus in a world with money? Today, if my sermon had a title, it would be called Jesus, Money, and Me. What does it mean to follow Jesus in a world with money?

What does it mean to trust him as savior in a world with money? Is following Jesus just a form of spirituality? And I'm not using that in a complimentary sense, because much of what passes for spirituality nowadays is having a warm, happy place inside.

[5 : 16] And I guess we all need little warm, happy places inside. Was it Happy Gilmore, that hockey player with anger problems? He had to try to look at that happy place inside.

I really love highbrow intellectual films, Adam Sandler and Happy Gilmore. You know, he had to look for that happy place inside so he wouldn't be angry. But is following Jesus just a form of spirituality, divorced from the real world of bank balances, bills, and possessions?

You know, one of the things, the rude things that people say about contemporary music is that a lot of contemporary Christian music is a lot of contemporary Christian music is just a variation on Jesus is my girlfriend type of music.

And one of the rude things which people say about those who like traditional music is that it's just really, you know, a President's Choice has, you know, memories of Chile and memories of this. It's just memories of a happy childhood. And so they come here because they like, you know, the old prayer book and hymns and all its memories of a happy childhood, you know, in England or wherever. And, you know, it's possible for Christianity just to be a form of spirituality.

[6 : 28] It's just a way of developing our interior happy place. So is following Jesus just a form of spirituality? Does being a Christ follower mean I need different attitudes, habits, perspectives, different saving patterns and spending patterns?

Is that what it means to follow Jesus, to be a Christ follower? Well, the passage that David read, the epistle, is one of the many, many passages in the Bible that talks about money and us and Jesus. So please turn to it now because that's what we're going to look at. 2 Corinthians 8, verses 1 to 9. It's on page 1004 if you're using the Pew Bibles.

Page 1004 if you're using the Pew Bibles. And it's 2 Corinthians 8, verses 1 to 9. And I want to sort of, I'm going to go through the passage quite quickly, but first I want to sort of look at two sort of Himalaya points or defining points in that passage.

These two points that if we have to, we sort of have to master these two points for other things to make sense. And by the way, yeah, there's two things here we have to sort of master before these things make any sense.

[7 : 58] And the first thing is in verse 5, which teaches us that first we give ourselves to Jesus. Trust Him as your Savior and follow Him as your Lord.

That Christianity is not about money. Listen to verse 5. And this they did. He's talking about a church which is persecuted and poor.

There's a double whammy if you ever had one. And yet they were spectacularly generous financially. And here's what he says in verse 5.

And this they did. Not as we had hoped, but first gave themselves to the Lord and then to us by the will of God. Notice that the thing that really just so delighted him was not so much that their generosity was great, although it was spectacular, but even with their financial generosity, he says, first they gave themselves to the Lord.

And that's the fundamental spiritual principle is that, you know, you tip the waiter, okay? But you love your wife and children.

[9 : 06] If you tip your wife and children and love the waiter or waitress, you're in deep trouble. And a wife and children, I'm speaking as a man, you women obviously would say husband, those of you who are married would say, you know, husbands and children if you're blessed with children.

You know, Louise would much rather have me love her and show that in all sorts of ways than for me just to give her a \$20 bill.

She'd rather have me say, Louise, I love you. You're irreplaceable. I'm just so glad and so thankful that I am married to you. That's, you know, that beats a \$20 bill every day of the week or a \$5 bill or a \$2, you know, \$2 coin.

And it's, you know, if that's what even an imperfect husband like myself has learned through my thick skull, imagine what it is for God.

God ultimately does not care about your money. He doesn't need your money. He doesn't need my money. He doesn't need any money. I mean, he's the owner of the entire created order and he can create whatever he wants.

[10:11] He's completely and utterly self-sufficient. God never relates to you or me out of a position of need. God relates to you and me out of love.

He only loves us. He is completely and utterly self-sufficient. Everything that he does towards us is love. That's so, folks, it's a different sermon, but it's fantastic good news.

You know why this is such good news? Because, you know, many of us have had friends maybe in childhood and, you know, the friend loves us, the friend loves us, the friend loves us, and then somebody new comes to school and all of a sudden that friend likes that other person more.

And rather than being best friends, we become like the second or third or fourth or fifth friend because their needs are being met somewhere else. We never have to worry that tomorrow we're going to wake up and God's finally had his needs met and he's moved on to somebody else.

Because God relates to you and me only out of love. And if we haven't given ourselves to Jesus, we could put \$10,000, \$100,000 in the plate, but if our heart is not his, he only weeps.

[11:19] He only weeps. And we could not put a single penny in that plate and we give our lives to Jesus and God throws a party in heaven and the angels are all up there dancing and shouting and singing, hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah, because we have given our lives to Christ.

The order is first we give ourselves to Jesus. And then, as Jesus moves and works in our lives, we learn what it means to give ourselves to people, especially give ourselves to gospel people, people who have given their lives to Christ, but giving ourselves to people.

And then we learn how to give of our money. But the order is first to give to Jesus. And that is why Paul here, when he says in verse 5, he says, but gave themselves to the Lord.

They gave themselves to the Lord. And he's so pleased about it. It has a double sense. Because, of course, first they had to give themselves to the Lord to be his children. And then, you know, just as Louise would be very upset if 25 years ago I said I loved her and then I've never said I love her yet again.

Part of what it means to grow in a marriage is that I have to learn to surrender myself and give myself and deepen my love to Louise time and time and time and time again.

[12:41] It's to be not something which is a once-for-all thing. The once-for-allness is entering into marriage and then a healthy marriage is falling in love again. Falling in love again.

Falling in love again. And learning to love and learning to love and deepening in love. And so it is that Paul is saying they gave themselves to the Lord. That's so fantastic. Not only the first time to become his, but they're doing it again.

They're giving themselves to the Lord. They're being renewed and they're being deepened. You know, my biggest fear about talking about money with you folks isn't that I might upset some Christians.

I mean, obviously I'm a bit upset by that. But because, you know, I'm a Canadian, I like everybody to like me. I want everybody to like me and think I'm a good guy. That's part of the Canadian character, our insecurity as a nation.

And I share in that because I am Canadian. Hopefully following Christ, but I am Canadian. My biggest fear about talking about money is not that I might offend some Christians, but that a spiritual seeker has come here this morning.

[13:49] And one of the things they believe about Christians is that Christians are only concerned about money. And my great worry whenever I preach on money is that I might keep a seeker from Christ.

When I first started as a priest to talk about money, I was worried about offending people. Now I'm not as worried about that anymore. But I deeply worry that maybe one of you have brought a seeker here this morning.

And one of their prejudices is that all Christians just want our money. And I worry that I talk about this and it will keep a person from Christ. And Lord, I just hope that is not the case.

That's why I said as long as you come to this church, if you have not given yourself to Christ, never put any money in the plate. We don't want your money. We want to serve you. We want to love you. We want to give to you.

We want to be a generous people, not a grasping people. And so please, if you are a guest, give yourself to Christ. That is what makes God happy. That is what causes the parties to be thrown in heaven.

[14:49] Now the second big Himalaya thing in this text for us to understand is verse 9. Those of you who are prayer book Anglicans and you come to an Anglican church on Christmas know that the offertory sentence for Christmastide is this verse.

And it goes like this, verse 9. It's one of my favorite verses in the Bible. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes, He became poor, that you, through His poverty, might become rich.

Isn't that a spectacular verse? Like there's a verse to memorize, folks. If you haven't memorized it, there's a verse to memorize. Becoming more like Jesus means becoming more generous.

That's what that text is telling us. We can never be more generous than Jesus. I mean, Jesus gave up the glory. He gave up, you know, He ended up even on the cross suffering separation from God when He bore our sins and the punishment of our sins.

He says, my God, my God, why have thou, why have you forsaken me as your sins and mine and your sin and mine rests on His very person? And He pays the price and experiences what that means.

[16:07] His sacrifice. He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. By His sacrifice, we are healed. It's through His death and resurrection that we can become the adopted children of God. And God, the Son of God, sets aside His glory, His prerogatives, His splendor, all of those things which are due to Him.

He sets all of these things aside, takes upon Himself our human nature, walks amongst us and teaches amongst us, and then ends up dying as a condemned man, a shameful death on a cross. And He does it all because He doesn't need anything but loves you and me. And so we can never be more generous than Jesus. And Christ followers want to become more like Jesus.

That's what a Christ follower wants, to become more like Jesus. And we can never be more generous than Jesus. And that's one of the reasons why if you look through later on, as you listen later on in verse 1, in verse 6, in verse 7, it keeps talking about the great, in verse 9, grace in Christ, grace in Christ.

It's why it's a spiritual issue how our hearts are in terms of generosity with our financial resources. As our hearts grow cold to Christ, our hands clutch more of the money.

[17:21] As our hearts grow cold towards Christ, our hands clutch more of the money. We see the money as mine, not his.

You know, some of us, to unblock the coldness that we suffer even now with Christ, it's not necessary that you maybe have to spend time fasting or spend time praying or ask somebody to have the Holy Spirit fall afresh upon you.

It might very well be that you have to deal with your bank balance. That I might have to deal with my bank balance. That what's keeping me from Christ is a clutching heart.

And that maybe God is calling me to give until I'm free. Because to become more grasping of our money is not to become more like Jesus.

Becoming more like Jesus means becoming more generous financially. And I can tell you that in my own life, the times that Jesus is farthest from me, it is definitely the case that the money is something that I want to clutch onto far more.

[18:30] And I feel far, far, far more fearful about trying to release the money which is truly his. Let's look at verse 1.

Just read the text through fairly quickly, just drawing out other things here about generosity.

Moreover, brothers and sisters, we make known to you the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia, that in a great trial of affliction, the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded in the riches of their liberality.

Which means generosity, liberality. It's an old sense of just being really, it's an old-fashioned word that just means open-handed. Just going around, in a sense, with our hands constantly open, rather than having clutched hands.

Just sort of pause here. One of the things which is so spectacular about the church in Macedonia, and that, by the way, if you're Bible scholars, it's the church in Philippi, it's the church in Berea, and it's the church in Thessalonica, as the three sort of predominant churches, and then the smaller churches as well.

And as you know, Philippi and Thessalonica both have letters written to them. In fact, one of the things about the church in Philippi, which is where Christianity first entered Europe, and the first European Christian was in Philippi, and the church in Philippi, if you read the book of Philippians, many people, it's their favorite letter in the Bible, because it's just such a, Paul is just so pleased with this congregation.

[20 : 05] He just so loves this congregation. It's like virtually no rebuke in that letter. His heart just goes out to the Philippians, because the Philippians' hearts have gone out to Christ and out to him, and the church is poor and persecuted.

The church is poor and persecuted, the double whammy. And you see, it reminds us that generosity is an attitude and a habit deeper than our resources.

One of the mistakes I've made in my life is thinking that when I finally have more money, I will be generous. And you know what? I can tell you this. We never have enough money to be generous. You know, I think there was a few years ago, they did a survey, and at virtually every income level, people said that if they could just have another \$5,000 to \$7,000 in their income, they'd be happy. It didn't matter if they were at \$20,000 a year, \$50,000 a year, \$100,000 a year. Like, they all just thought, if I could just get that little bit of extra money, I'll be a lot more happy. Generosity is an attitude and habit deeper than our resources.

[21 : 10] We do not wait to be generous, because if we wait to have enough money to be generous, we will never think that we have enough money to be generous. And so here we see that the Philippians, the Thessalonians, the Bereans, and the other people in Macedonia, even though they were poor and even though they were persecuted, they were financially generous.

Verse 3, For I bear witness that according to their ability, yes, and beyond their ability, they were freely willing. This tells us a couple of really important things as well.

Remember what I said, that they were poor and persecuted. Talk about a double whammy. I don't know if you've ever, some of you have maybe heard me talk about ministers, and when I'm talking about other ministers, I'm talking about myself as well.

I think ministers, all ministers have one of two, have a right-handedness. I'm not being prejudiced against left-handed people, but you know, that's the analogy, a right-handedness.

And ministers are either prone to be workaholics or lazy. That's our right-handedness. They were either prone to work too much or work not enough.

[22 : 20] And one of the things I've observed in my own life and in the life of other ministers over the years is that workaholics beat themselves up that they're too lazy. And lazy people don't beat themselves up but complain to their friends that they're working way too hard.

And that one of the hard things about us is, you know, what Walker Percy said, that one of the mysteries about being a human being is that after you meet somebody for about five minutes, you can perfectly summarize the major aspects of their life and whether you like them or not.

And yet, as Walker Percy said at the time, I've lived with myself for 60 years and I still can't figure myself out. And why is it that we can sort of sort somebody else out in five minutes and can't sort ourselves out?

I've been with myself for 50 years. I still can't recognize myself properly. Often can't recognize my voice if I hear it played back. And don't see the things about my life that are just maybe so obvious to anyone of you that you could just tell me very, very quickly.

Sometimes people do meanly, but you don't have to do that today. And so one of the things about this is that I think that often people who are very, very generous, they say, gosh, I wish I could be more generous.

[23 : 30] I just wish I could be more generous, you know? And those of us who really aren't very good at being generous just sort of think, gosh, I'm awfully generous.

You know, it's just one of those things, one of the reasons we need constantly the medicine of the Word of God and we need the renewing power of the Holy Spirit and we need godly friends and we need to ask God to God in a gentle but powerful way to make ourselves, see ourselves as we really are so that we can repent and amend our lives according to God's holy word is that we need to see ourselves as we really are because it's so easy for us to delude ourselves.

But here we see that Paul is astounded because these Macedonians have given according to their ability and beyond their ability. You know, I mean, if you're a student and you're just scraping by, your ability to be financially generous is going to be very, very limited.

You know, if we have a six-figure income or a seven-figure income, our ability to be generous is far greater. And that's why on one level Paul here is recognizing that the means do have, I mean, there's obviously a bit of a context.

You know, if you're only making \$15,000 a year, you can't write a \$50,000 check. It's just completely and utterly impossible. But the thing which astounds Paul is that not only are they generous within their means, but they even go beyond their means, which means that they are trusting in the providence of God.

[25 : 01] They are trusting in the providence of God. You see, at the heart of a generous person's heart is that generous people, those of you here who are very generous, you know that you're generous at the front end, not the back end.

That we're generous with the beginning of our money, not the end of our money. That we're generous in a sense as soon as the paycheck comes or as soon as the dividend check comes in or as soon as the commission check comes in, we're thinking to ourselves, how can I be generous with this?

And that those of us who struggle with generosity wait until just the day before our next dividend check or paycheck and see what we have left over to be generous with.

And generosity is a front end thing, not a leftover thing. And that, folks, you see, one of the things that we really need to be healed with, and, you know, I'm saying we need to be healed of, is that, you know, many of us struggle with deep woundedness of not trusting that God can meet our needs.

We struggle with deep woundedness. I've always seen everything as being empty and going to ruin and rack and ruin and we're prone to despair. And it's really, really, really hard for some of us.

[26 : 20] You know, maybe we struggle with addictions and other types of things. And one of the reasons that, once again, this is such a spiritual issue is that Christ has to come in and heal us of our sense that our needs will never be met and heal us of this sense that the future is only going to be bad and worse and worse and worse and therefore I have to somehow take control of this myself.

and we need the healing work of God in our lives to trust in his providence, to understand that everything I have is a gift.

And that if God has been able to meet my needs to this point, he can continue to meet my needs into the future. And that there are times in our lives that we are called to be generous beyond our means, meaning we're going to have to trust in the providence of God.

Very briefly, just to continue reading the text, verse 4, imploring us with much urgency that we would receive the gift and the fellowship of the ministering to the saints. In other words, they have a hunger and a passion to be financially generous in gospel ministry.

And this they did, not as we had hoped, but first gave themselves to the Lord and then to us by the will of God. So we urge Titus that as he had begun, so he would also complete this grace in you as well.

[27 : 41] But as you abound in everything, in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all diligence, and in your love for us, see that you abound in this grace also.

I mean, choose to excel in being generous to gospel ministry. That's what Paul is saying to me, that generosity is a choice.

And Paul is saying to me, the scripture is saying to me, George, don't just choose to excel maybe in, you know, maybe doing this or this or this or this or this, but call out to God and say, Dear God, please so free me up and so renew me and fill me with your Holy Spirit that I might excel in being generous.

So excel in being generous that people will say, you know, George, maybe you should be a little bit less generous, you know. That's what Paul is saying is, George, you know, George, just choose to

call out to God and ask God to help you to be more and more generous.

That we need God's order in our lives financially. We need God's order in our lives in terms of how we view our possessions. We need God's order in our lives that we might trust him to continue to provide.

[28 : 57] We need God's order in our lives so that we can provide for the needs of our family and provide for the needs of gospel ministry. Choose to excel in giving. Let's bow our heads in prayer.

Father, you know that, you know the state of our finances and you know that many of us, we really are struggling and many of us have debt problems and, you know, many of us maybe have employment issues and sales commissions issues and, Father, you know us, Father.

And still you love us. Still you love us. We give you thanks and praise, Father, that it's us that you want. And I ask, first of all, Father, that your Holy Spirit would fall with fresh power upon us this morning, fall with fresh power this morning upon us, that we might fall in love with you again, that we might surrender to your son again with greater depth.

And, Father, for those of us who really struggle with financial issues, we ask for the healing authority, your healing authority, to come to bear in our finances. And for those struggling with employment or commissions, Father, we ask for your healing authority and your providence to come to bear on those of us who struggle with these issues.

And, Father, for all of us, we ask that you would help us to choose generosity and choose trusting in you. Father, may your Holy Spirit fall with fresh power upon us that we can become an ever more generous people.

[30 : 41] in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.