

Mission:Dignity Sunday Sermon

Open for Business

2 Corinthians 8:1-5

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Gary, my barber, has a small cardboard sign that hangs by a frazzled string on a suction cup hook on the front door of his shop. Judging from the fadedness of the black magic-marker lettering, as well as the smudges from hands that have operated an Oster trimmer and scissors all day, my guess is Gary's had that sign on the door since he took over the shop nearly 25 years ago. If you happen by there after 5:45 in the afternoon, he's already turned out the lights, locked the door and flipped the sign to the side that says, "Sorry...We're Closed." But, if you drive up around 7:30 in the morning — except Sunday or Monday — you'll find Gary's red Ford pickup parked in its usual space to the left of the building, the fluorescent interior lights and the barber pole will be on, and the sign on the front door will be turned to "Come In...We're Open."

But the sign doesn't tell the whole story. When you walk in, Gary treats you like an old friend with a hearty handshake and a warm hello. And a hot cup of coffee if you want to share one. The sign says Gary's door is open for business. His actions say that his heart is open, too. Gary simply lives out a principle which was exemplified thousands of years ago by the Christians living in Macedonia.

In Acts 11:26-27 we read that a severe famine had been predicted, "*During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.)*"

The church in Jerusalem was affected by this famine and the Christians in that area were in crucial need. In 2 Corinthians 8:1-5, Paul called upon the Gentile churches in Asia Minor and the Macedonian region to take up a collection that would be used to relieve the suffering of their brothers and sisters in Jerusalem.

Paul wrote earlier about this collection in 1 Corinthians 16. This was where he talked about the importance of putting aside something each week, giving proportionally in accordance with income, and exercising proper stewardship over the gifts that were given. He told the Corinthians he was on his way to Macedonia (1 Corinthians 16:5), but would be coming back so that preparations could be made to send their generous love gift to the needy in Jerusalem.

When Paul reached Macedonia, he found their doors were open for business. But he also found open hearts that were about the Father's business.

They opened their hearts

When Paul approached the Macedonian churches to tell them about the collection for the needy, he didn't expect them to give very much. After all, they didn't have much to give. And they were going through their own trials. It would have been easy for them to say, "Paul, our budget is really tight. We can't afford to do anything." But, an amazing thing happened. Paul writes, "*And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God's will.*" (v. 5)

When an opportunity for ministry came along, the FIRST thing the Macedonians did was to seek God. They didn't call the bank. They didn't consult the accountant. They didn't check with the treasurer. They didn't open their checkbooks to see if they could afford to give some money. They didn't open a spreadsheet to see if they could give a little out of the budget. They opened their hearts and gave them completely to God to see what HE wanted to do.

God can do incredible things through people who are sold out to him. *“But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”* (Matthew 6:33) *“For the eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him.”* (2 Chronicles 16:9) *“If you fully obey the LORD your God and carefully follow all his commands I give you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations on earth. All these blessings will come upon you and accompany you if you obey the LORD your God.”* (Deuteronomy 28:1-2)

Paul wasn't surprised that the Macedonians remembered to put God first. That's a natural part of being God's people. He'd already told the Corinthians, *“So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.”* (1 Corinthians 10:31) He used the example of the Macedonians to encourage the Corinthians to keep on remembering God in all things.

It's tragic when a church forgets God. It doesn't happen immediately, but gradually as the church accumulates more and more material blessings from the hand of God. Often, the more wealth and property a church has, the easier it is for them to forget the One who gave all this to them in the first place.

Deuteronomy 8 is an entire chapter devoted to warning people against forgetting God. Verses 10-14 are very direct: *“When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the Lord your God for the good land he has given you. Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day. Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.”*

The Macedonians were careful to remember God had saved them. God had sustained them. God had satisfied them. And, God would strengthen them for whatever opportunity he placed before them. Rather than being overcome by pride, they overcame by prayer and God took notice of their wholehearted desire to serve him.

God wanted to do a mighty work through them. **But God will not do a mighty work through us until he has done a mighty work in us.** That happens when we humbly tell him, “Come In...We're Open.”

They opened their eyes

The Macedonians didn't just open their hearts — they opened their eyes, too.

One of the most astounding statements in all of scripture is found in verse four. Entirely on their own, the Macedonians *“urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints.”*

I believe this is the key thing that amazed Paul about the Macedonians. Yes, he was pleased by their devotion. Yes, he was grateful for their gifts. But, it was the intensity of their desire to do something for others in need that captured his attention.

Imagine the joy in a pastor's heart to see people pleading with him for a chance to give an offering. Think about missionaries getting deluged with letters from people asking how they can give something to help their work. How incredible it would be to present information about a ministry to the needy and have people begging for the opportunity to share a financial gift to support that ministry.

First Peter 4:10 says, *"Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms."* God has blessed us so that we can be a blessing to others.

Sometimes, though, we get so focused on our own desires and needs, that we forget the needs of others. Or, we get so caught up in "busyness" that we forget the Father's business.

John asked a penetrating question in 1 John 3:17: *"If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?"*

The evidence of God's love in our lives is how we treat and serve others — especially those in need. When Jesus was talking to his disciples in John 4:35, he told them, *"Open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest."*

That's his call even today. To open our eyes and look at the needs around us. To see people as Jesus sees them. And to step forward and share his grace with them.

That's God's business. That's the business of the church.

The Macedonians opened their hearts to God. They opened their eyes and looked for ways to touch others. Then, they opened their hands.

They opened their hands

God's will for us concerning those in need is found throughout the Bible, but no more clearly than in Deuteronomy 15:7-11:

If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother. Rather be openhanded and freely lend him whatever he needs. Be careful not to harbor this wicked thought: "The seventh year, the year for canceling debts, is near," so that you do not show ill will toward your needy brother and give him nothing. He may then appeal to the LORD against you, and you will be found guilty of sin. Give generously to him and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land.

When Paul and Barnabas left to share the Gospel with the Gentiles, he was given this charge from the leaders of the church: *"All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do."* (Galatians 2:10)

Paul was eager to help the poor. The Macedonians urgently pleaded for a chance to help, too. They hadn't forgotten what it's like to be in need. When you are living from check to check, it's easy to identify with others who share similar struggles. When you grow comfortable, it's easy to overlook those who don't have as much as you do. The Macedonians didn't have much, but whatever they had was available for others who needed it more.

What is our response to those in need?

An open heart cannot maintain a closed hand. A closed hand does not give anything. But, neither can it receive anything. The Macedonians first opened their hearts. They opened their eyes. Then they opened their hands.

Amazingly, the Macedonians not only gave what they were able, but “*even beyond their ability.*” (verse 3) Now, how could that happen? It’s easy to see how they could give what they had, but how did they give more than what they had?

One simple reason: God opened the windows of heaven.

God opened the windows

Paul was telling the Corinthians about what the Macedonian churches had done. Well, almost. He was really telling them what GOD had done. “*We want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches.*” (verse 1) It wasn’t an issue of the Macedonians giving their money. It was a matter of God meeting the needs of others through the Macedonians with HIS resources.

There’s an important principle just across the page in 2 Corinthians 9. We are familiar with verse seven that talks about God loving a cheerful giver. But the thing to be cheerful about — no, excited about — is the promise in verse eight: “*And God is able to make all grace abound unto you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.*”

God’s people today need to get hold of an important fact: **God is able!**

- When Abraham was ready to sacrifice Isaac on the altar, God provided a lamb. **God is able!**
- When the Israelites wandered in the desert, God supplied manna every day. **God is able!**
- When the people of God were pursued by Pharaoh’s armies, they crossed the Red Sea on dry land. **God is able!**
- When Joshua and the people faced a stronghold in Jericho, they marched around seven times and gave a shout and the walls came down. **God is able!**
- When David confronted Goliath with a slingshot and a stone, the giant fell. **God is able!**
- When Shadrach, Meschach and Abednego were thrown in Nebuchadnezzar’s fire that was seven times hotter than normal, a fourth man appeared and they escaped without even smelling like smoke. **God is able!**
- When four men found their friend at death’s door, they took him up on the roof, lowered him down to where Jesus was teaching, and the man was made whole. **God is able!**
- When the woman with the issue of blood reached out to touch Jesus’ garment, she was healed from the disease that had debilitated her for years. **God is able!**
- When the centurion’s son was close to death, by faith he told Jesus to just speak the word and his son was healed. **God is able!**
- When Jesus took a little boy’s lunch and gave thanks, 5,000 people were fed. **God is able!**

- When Jesus said, “It is finished!” and was laid in the tomb, God raised him up on that first Easter morning! **God is able!**
- When the Thessalonians were concerned about those who had died in Christ, Paul told them they, too, would be gloriously raised up in the last day along with us who remain and, together, we would live in heaven for ever and ever. **God is able!**

“Give, and it will be given to you,” the scripture says. “A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.” (Luke 6:38)

“And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 3:19)

God is able to make **all** grace abound to you and to me. In **all** things and at **all** times we can have **all** that we need. Why? **So that we can abound in every good work. So that we can share God’s grace with others.**

God did not forget the Macedonians. As they opened their hearts to him, he met their needs and gave them even more. And, he recorded their story for all time as an encouragement to the Corinthians — and to you and me — to open our lives to God and to others.

God did a mighty work THROUGH the Macedonians. But it all started because they allowed him to do a mighty work IN them.

What does God want to do through you today? What does God want to do IN you today?

Join me on this Mission:Dignity Sunday in a renewed commitment to put God and his plans and purposes first in our lives. Let’s get down to business and ask, “Lord, what do you want to do in my life?” Then let’s ask, “Lord, what do you want to do through me?” As Mary told the disciples, “Whatever he says to you, do it.”

There’s no better time than right now to hang a “Come In...We’re Open” sign on our hearts. And there’s no better time than right now to open our eyes, to open our hands and to be about our Father’s business.