

SURRENDERING

LIFT Series (Part 4) | 2 Corinthians 8:1-12

[LIVE] Good morning! If you are just joining us today, I want to personally welcome you to Christ Church. We're in a defining season as a church family. We've weathered a pandemic together and are now rising once again to be the kind of church that can LIFT thousands of people precious to God toward their full potential. To do that, your prayers and good heart, your volunteer energies and leadership gifts are needed in many places we'll share more about in days ahead. But as we don't talk about too often, we also need your financial stewardship to do some crucial things. **[#C1]** Before I jump into my main message for today, I want to review what we're seeking to do.

[#C2] In addition to stretching our faith and discipleship, the LIFT Initiative aims to underwrite ALL the normal activities we do over a two-year period AND allow us to take on a few special projects that will strengthen our capacity as a church to LIFT people of all ages for years to come. **[#C3]** The majority of our giving to LIFT is just to keep going strong the wonderful worship services, growth group ministries, pastoral care, hospitality, and mission partner support that bless so many people. We've also baked into our two-year budget some monies for paying down our mortgage and for raising our investment in discipleship, leadership development, group life, and digital outreach.

[LIVE] I know it sounds like a big number, but it takes about \$13M per year or a total of about \$26.5M over two years to maintain the quality of our ministry and missions.

On top of this base, we have a dream of funding a small number of special projects.

[#C4] First, we want to invest further in lifting Kids & Families by restarting our preschool, instituting a special needs ministry, and renovating the classrooms where more than 500 young people meet weekly. We haven't improved those spaces in nearly 20 years. **[#C5]** Secondly, we'd like to establish what we're calling a LIFT Center – a permanent home for our Food Pantry and Clothing Closet program -- and cluster around it some other Christian ministries that can help lift people beyond mere subsistence to actual self-sufficiency. **[#C6]** Like any physical home, our two campuses also have a variety of deferred maintenance needs (leaky roofs, eroding parking surfaces, failing mechanical systems and more). We'd like to start addressing these, if we have the funds. **[#C7]** And, finally, we'd like to drop our mortgage even further and eventually free up interest payment dollars for future ministry or missions. Under no circumstances, will we increase debt during this initiative. You'll only see it drop. All together, these special projects aggregate to about \$7.5M.

Our total two-year dream budget is \$34M – 26.5 plus 7.5 -- and we'll adjust it based on what God ultimately provides. Next Sunday February 12, all of us will have the chance to turn in a Faith Commitment Card that describes what we pray that God's grace will enable each of us to do to support our church's overall work during 2023 and 2024. Thank you for praying earnestly and asking God to show you what your part should be.

[LIVE] When our leadership team first started dreaming about this initiative, I confess that I had considerable trepidations. For those who haven't studied the SAT word list in a while, that means I was seriously scared! For reasons I'll confess further next week, I withered a bit at the thought of what this sort of reach would mean for me and Amy. I was also aware that the pandemic left us with fewer people around here. Throw on top of that the stock market decline and general anxiety about the economy and it just felt like a pretty heavy time to be trying to perform a LIFT like this.

But God changed my heart. He built my conviction that it was time indeed to advance and not retrench as a church. Part of that change happened because the Lord impressed on me how many people in our time are feeling the gravity of life and how much a church like ours helps people find his lifting grace. Part of the change in me also occurred because God opened my eyes to the moral chaos and divisions of our time and the need for vital churches that provide moral clarity and a greater kind of community to people. But one of the most powerful inspirations God gave me was studying one particular story from the life of the early church. I want to explore that text with you this morning and see if it doesn't inspire you too. You can find it in 2 Corinthians 8. You can read all the details yourself but let me set the context.

In the late First Century A.D., the Christians in Jerusalem were struggling under a terrible persecution. The people of the first church established on the Day of Pentecost – the church that had sent out the first missionaries to spread the gospel and establish churches in other parts of the world – the people of THAT church were now being ostracized, arrested, tortured, and killed – in a word, crushed. Learning of this, the Apostle Paul sent word to Christians in other parts of the Roman empire, asking for help. He said, in effect: *Let's raise money to lift these people above the gravity of life.*

Paul's assistant, Titus, brought news of this initiative to the church at cosmopolitan Corinth, a city on the water roughly halfway between Athens and Sparta. At that time, Corinth was one of the largest and most prosperous cities of the ancient world. It was the Chicago of Greece and the church there was, relatively speaking, one of the most financially capable Christian communities in the whole world at that moment.

Apparently, the Corinthians responded to Paul's appeal with some kind of gift for the cause and were quick to do it. So Paul writes them in 2nd Corinthians 8 to acknowledge that: **[#]Last year you were the first not only to give but also to have the desire to do so (2 Cor 8:9).** Thank you. You could have ignored the need altogether. But you didn't. You wanted to be part of it and you did something faster than others.

[LIVE] But Paul knew something else. What the Corinthians had done, thus far, wasn't close to what they had the capacity to do. Paul was sad, I think, for two reasons: One, because the need of the Jerusalem Church was great and the Corinthians could really

help meet it; yet they'd only given nominally so far. And, secondly, because they had not yet awoken to the JOY of letting their lives be a generous conduit for God's grace.

And so Paul goes out on a limb, as pastors sometimes do with people they love, and he says: **[#]Here is my judgment about what is best for you in this matter... Finish the work... according to your means (2 Cor 8:11).** He underlines that last part in the next verse too: **[#]The gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what one does not have (2 Cor 8:12).** I can't stress this biblical stewardship principle enough. God doesn't compare the amount we give to the purposes of his Church and Kingdom with any other person. Giving is always personal and relative. It's about what we do with what we have. As Jesus teaches in Mark chapter 12, an anonymous widow's "tiny" offering can be far more impressive to GOD than the "major" gift of somebody who gets their name on some wall (Mark 12:41-43). Generosity is about what we COULD do, if our HEART was surrendered to God.

[LIVE]So, then, Paul goes to the heart. He tells the Corinthians about the church that is currently setting the pace in meeting the needs of Jerusalem. It's not the powerful Roman church or the affluent folks over in Athens or Ephesus. It's not the Corinthians. It's a group of believers up in Macedonia who are dirt poor and under immense pressures themselves. They are the ones who perform the most beautiful LIFT.

[#]Brothers and sisters, [I] want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. [#]Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. [#] For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. And then this is the part that really blows me away: **[#]Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the *privilege* of sharing in this service... (2 Cor 8:1-4).**

[LIVE]During my twenties, I spent two weeks in the high mountains of Ecuador. My brother, Jeff, was working for the U.S. Agency for International Development, doing a research project among the rural poor. One day we traveled on his motorcycle up the mountain switchbacks to a little home, owned by a couple who had become Jeff's friends. The house was made of simple boards. The floor was dirt. There was a lone lightbulb in the structure, dangling from a wire over the family table. The table would make any picnic table you've ever sat at look luxurious.

We'd been invited there for dinner. Big bugs chattered in the air above us. Our hostess brought out the meal – a bowl of reddish-orange soup and a bit of bread. She and her husband sat down on the bench opposite us. I waited for them to bring the bowls and utensils for themselves. But they just sat there, beaming. I was flummoxed. And Jeff said: "Eat." And we ate, as our hosts sat looking at us... smiling at us... feeling some otherworldly kind of joy that though there was not enough food to feed them AND us, they could lift US. **[#]Their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I**

testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the *privilege of sharing in this service...* (2 Cor 8:1-4). And the Kingdom of God broke in.

[LIVE] It strikes me how kindly and patiently, Paul speaks to the Corinthian church. He has, in a sense, been to that mountain home where Jeff and I ate that night. He has met what I will call, the Macedonian heart. And so he gently but firmly calls the Corinthians to RISE to their God-given potential. **[#] *Just as you excel in everything--in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us --see that you also excel in this grace of giving (2 Cor 8:7).*** In other words, you're already great stewards of your other gifts. You are great leaders. You are people of wonderful hospitality and creativity. You are marvelous parents and volunteers in so many places. Now, be excellent also as stewards of money, according to what you have, excel in this grace of giving.

Some time ago, I sat around a table with five people, as a provocative question hung in the air: **[#] *"What do you feel God is leading you toward in this next season of your life?"*** One person answered: *"I feel God is leading me to be less concerned with my work and more concerned with my family."* Another one said: *"I think I'm being led to give more of my time to non-profit work."* A third observed, *"I'm thinking about how my company can be better known for what it does in the community."* And a fourth chimed in: **[#] *"For me, it's about moving from success to significance."***

At this, everyone who'd responded thus far murmured in agreement. Their friend had put words around the impulse beneath their statements. Each of them had already acquired quite a lot of success in worldly terms, but now wanted to move toward something even more meaningful or noble, something they could feel and tell others was truly significant.

[LIVE] And then the fifth person spoke. He was the oldest one in the circle, the person who all of us recognized had had the biggest footprint in multiple spheres of influence. "I don't know," he said, obviously struggling to find words for some deep feelings. "I've definitely focused a lot on SUCCESS and found that too much about ME. I've worked pretty hard on the SIGNIFICANCE thing too and, if I'm honest, a lot of that has still been about ME -- how good it made me feel to be or appear to others as this virtuous or charitable person. But I think God is trying to do something new in me right now. I think he's trying to **[#] *move me from success and significance to SURRENDER.*** And all of us just sat silently with that.

SURRENDER. That's not a word we use a lot or at least not as something it is good to move toward. Most of us don't want to see the Ukrainian army surrender to the Russian forces. There were more than a few tears this week as football great, Tom Brady, finally surrendered to retirement. In earthly terms, surrender often seems synonymous with loss or decline or defeat.

[LIVE] In the Kingdom of God, however, surrender means gain and ascendance and victory. It means being fully yielded to the heartbeat of God and his purposes. It means saying: “Not my will but yours be done... Not my bowl but others be filled... Not my getting but your grace and glory be supreme.” Surrender means excelling not in lavishing upon ourselves but in lifting others.

As I asked last week: What are you focused on? What is the treasure your heart is pursuing? I want to FOLLOW wherever God leads me. I want to TRUST him to provide for me. I want to PRIORITIZE his Church and Kingdom. And I want to SURRENDER, like one does in marriage [*grabbing the ring finger*] – for better for worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health. That couple in the mountains of Ecuador... those Christians in Macedonia... remain a luminous, inspiring example in my mind.

As St. Paul would say: **[#]They exceeded our expectations: They gave themselves FIRST of all to the Lord... That’s SURRENDER... [#]and then by the will of God also to us (2 Cor 8:5).** That’s the SERVICE that naturally proceeds from being surrendered to God.

[LIVE] What are you going to excel at in days ahead? Will be it your success? Will it be your significance? What would it look like for you to say: *No, in all of my relationships and with all of my resources, I will surrender to the purposes of God.*