



## Step by Step

### 2 Corinthians 8:1-15

## Stewardship Commitment Day

### November 1, 2006

If you could look back over your whole life to see the key steps you have made, what would they be?

- The time when you were a baby, a wee toddler, and your parents coaxed you to stand up and take your very first step?
- The day when you were five or six years old, and stepped into kindergarten or first grade?
- The time when you stepped onto the stage at high school and accepted your graduation diploma?
- The time you stepped into a sanctuary for your wedding?

Life is one step after another; and some of them mark key turning points in your life.

The Bible speaks of the lives that we make step by step. It speaks of our walk in life, our walk with God. Some of the key scenes in the New Testament are when someone takes a fateful step, such as when Jesus stepped into the Jordan River for his baptism, or when Zacchaeus stepped away from the tree he was in and stepped toward Jesus, or when Jesus put his shoulder under his cross and took a step up the hill called Golgotha.

Anyone who would follow Jesus has to begin by taking a first step, and another step, and another step, following the footsteps of Jesus, becoming a disciple of the Lord.

These last few weeks we have been using the same language when we have spoken of financial stewardship. Our stewardship is a matter of taking one step of sacrifice, then another step of giving, and then another. We grow in our giving step by step. With each step we take, we look ahead and see Jesus calling us to make the next step.

During these last few weeks we have also been following the steps of Paul in the Book of Acts across the Mediterranean world as he takes the good news to all peoples. Today we will read not from Acts, but from a letter Paul wrote during those travels to a church in Corinth. In the letter, Paul calls on the Corinthians to take the next step in their following after Jesus, including the next financial step. He challenged the Corinthians to step up to a financial promise they had made a year before: a promise to take a relief

offering and send it to the church in Jerusalem, which was suffering from a famine. Word of the project had spread north from Greece to the churches of Macedonia. Ironically, the Macedonians quickly sent their relief offering, while the Corinthians had let the project slide. Now Paul, in 2 Corinthians 8:1-15, calls on that church to step up: (read scripture).

BEFORE PAUL CALLS THE CORINTHIANS TO STEP UP, HE TELLS THEM OF HOW THE MACEDONIANS HAVE ALREADY STEPPED UP. Macedonia was a poor region. When the Roman Empire conquered the region, Rome took charge of the natural resources and put a tight noose on trade. It sounds like Paul knew how poor they were and therefore did not ask them to help with the famine relief he was organizing for Jerusalem. But when the Macedonians heard of the project, they came to Paul and pleaded to be included, not to receive help, but to give help themselves.

Their response was truly amazing. In the Williams translation, v. 2 says:

...in spite of a terrible test of trouble, the mighty flood of their gladness mingling with the depths of their poverty has overflowed and resulted in the abundance of their liberality.

Isn't that surprising? Yes, and no. Poor people are generally more generous than rich people. That was true in the first century. It is still true in the twenty-first century according to giving analysts. Poor people understand what it is like to be poor, so they give.

The poor Macedonians certainly gave. Their giving snowballed in a step by step fashion. Paul listed those steps in verses 3 and 4:

1. ...they voluntarily gave according to their means,
2. ...and even beyond their means,
3. ...begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing...

In verse 5, Paul again describes the progress of their giving, this time in a two step process:

1. ...they gave themselves first to the Lord,
2. ...and, by the will of God, to us...

Anyone who takes the step of giving oneself to God will naturally take the step of giving oneself to others. When you give yourself to God, you will find yourself giving to others. It's all a part of the gracious circle of God's grace. So it was not so much the Macedonians doing this on their own; it was God's grace working a miracle of giving through these poor Macedonians.

NOW THAT PAUL HAS TOLD HOW THE MACEDONIANS HAVE STEPPED UP, PAUL THEN REMINDS THE CORINTHIANS THAT IT IS TIME FOR THEM TO STEP UP.

It's WAY past time, for it had been a year ago that they had taken the first steps for this relief effort. But no sooner had they taken a step forward, that they took a step backward. They had a falling out with Paul. You can read about that in the earlier part of this letter. All I'll say for now is what all of you know: when conflict comes, ministry gets shoved to the back burner. It was a step backward.

But somehow Paul and that church managed to some steps forward toward reconciliation. Once they had taken care of their relationship, they could go forward with their ministry. It was time to step up and finish what they had started.

Paul appealed to their pride to step up in verse 7. The Corinthians liked to excel. They liked to be first in everything. They were a competitive lot. They always got excited about who was the wisest, or who had the greatest gift of the Spirit, or who could bring the best food to the Sunday love feast and Lord's Supper. Their pride had gotten them into spiritual trouble more than once, but now Paul was playing on their pride to do good. He Paul wrote them:

Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking. (2 Corinthians 8:7)

So Paul reminded them of how the Macedonians had stepped up. Then Paul challenged their pride to step up. And then Paul reminded them of how Jesus had stepped up for them:

For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor. So that by his poverty you might become rich. (2 Cor. 8:9)

Step by step, Paul was leading the Corinthians to finish what they had started. With the example of Macedonia, the example of their own Corinthian pride, and the example of Jesus, how could they hold back? Yet Paul was not holding Macedonia over Corinth. Paul was holding Jesus before Corinth. The greatest motive to give to someone is that someone has given to you. It was time for Corinth to step up.

**STEP UP: IT'S TIME TO COMMIT YOUR BEST TO GOD**

The Macedonians stepped up. Eventually the Corinthians stepped up. Now what about us Wilsonians?

Like Paul, our Stewardship Team has been telling stories of how others have stepped up before us. Vanise told us about his pastor who kept giving away the clothes

on his back, until Vanise's family made sure to give that pastor the clothes he needed. Jason told us about the family that made the unique step of keeping the same standard of living so they could increase their standard of giving beyond a tithe, and made a substantial gift for the play area of a children's hospital where their child had been healed.

All of those were memorable steps taken by ordinary people. Stewardship is one of the steps we make as we follow in the steps of Jesus and become his disciples. All we're doing today is asking the big question: what step is next for you?

We are convinced this is a good way to ask the question. For those who have just started growing in their giving, a step by step approach can help them to grow toward the gold standard (pun intended) of tithing. A step by step approach accepts people where they are, but also challenges them to go forward.

A step by step approach also helps people begin now, rather than putting it off. In our time, we've been indoctrinated into the idea that we never have enough. If we waited until we felt we had enough before we really gave to God's ministries, then we would never really give. But a step by step approach teaches us that everyone can make a beginning, no matter how little we feel we have. And once we start giving, as the poor Macedonians discovered, then we will realize that in truth we have a lot to give after all.

We have a lot to give, because God has first given a lot to us. Paul pointed out how it's all about grace. Interesting: Paul never referred to the relief offering in monetary terms at all, but always called it "this generous undertaking" (v. 7), this grace. We give because we have been given unto. We have received the gracious gift of God, and we cannot help but pass it on. We complete the circle of grace by letting it flow through us to someone else.

So step up, and let the circle of grace be unbroken.

-- Douglas E. Murray