

Sermon for Sunday, November 7, 1982 by Dr. Andrew A. Jumper, Senior Pastor
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"CHRISTIANS AND THE SPIRITUAL POVERTY LEVEL"
II Corinthians 8:1-6

Text: "...for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy
and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of liberality of
their part."
II Corinthians 8:2

The area to the north of Greece is called Macedonia. That area has been
linked historically to Greece, but Macedonians don't like to be called
Greeks because they aren't. One of the greatest figures in history came
from Macedonia. Philip managed to gain control of Macedonia and then
his son, known as Alexander the Great, managed to gain control of the rest
of the world. But the greatness of Macedonia didn't last very long, and
by the time he reached his early thirties, Alexander was dead. The
ancient city of Philippi, named after his father, today is a mass of
rubble and heaped stones. So much for the glory of the world.

But during the early days of the Christian church, some Macedonians came
to know Jesus as their savior. Under Paul's preaching they fell in love
with Jesus and surrendered their lives to him. Now, these were not
rich Macedonians. As a matter of fact, they fell far below the poverty
level because St. Paul tells us they were extremely poor.

We have a lot of people today who fall below the poverty level. That
isn't true for very many of us here at Central. I suspect most of us
don't even know where the poverty level is. But there are other kinds of
poverty levels. For example, there is educational poverty. In some
countries the vast majority of people can neither read nor write and
there is educational poverty. In some countries they are so poor and
backwards there is an industrial poverty. Those places are so
primitive, so lacking in industry and in manufacturing that they fall
below the industrial poverty line.

But the most serious poverty level of all is the spiritual level.
Probably more people fall below the spiritual poverty level than all of
the other kinds of levels put together. And it doesn't matter how
educated you are, or how rich, or where you live for you can still fall
below that level.

No--the poverty problem is not one of mere economics for it can be a
spiritual problem, too. Some of the poorest people in the world this
morning are people who are poor in love, poor in spiritual joy, poor in
their relationship to Jesus. I suppose one of the saddest tragedies
today in human lives are the tragedies of people whose hearts are poor
towards God and who fall below the spiritual poverty line.

But in our Scripture this morning, St. Paul tells us that out of the
poverty of the Macedonias came a wealth of liberality. Yes, poor
people, out of their poverty, produced what Paul called a "wealth of
liberality." But isn't that often typical? I was raised back during
the depression as many of you were. Those were tough times and often we
had no money and very little else. But I never saw my mother turn away
a hobo at the door or refuse a meal to a needy person. None of us had

very much, but what we had we were willing to share. Well, Paul said that's what happened to the Macedonians. He said they begged for the favor of helping fellow Christians.

Now, something happened to them as a result: their hearts were filled with joy! Financially they fell below the poverty line, but spiritually they were rich towards God.

Let me ask you this question this morning: where are you in relationship to the spiritual poverty line? Are you rich towards God? Let's give ourselves a little spiritual test this morning. Answer these questions silently in your mind and you can keep score for yourself on your fingers if you like! Here's the first question: Is Jesus satisfied with the Bible study you do? Question number two: Is Jesus satisfied with the time you spend in prayer? Third question: Is God pleased with your example of Christian living? That is, would God give you a passing grade on how you live as a Christian at work, at home, and in other relationships? Here is question four: if God audited your bank book, would he smile and pat you on the back? Well, how are you doing so far? Are you above or below the spiritual poverty level? I suspect most of us would have to confess that we are not doing too well!

Since we do want to be rich towards God and since we do want to have that spiritual joy, let me suggest some basic principles of joy. Here is joy principle number one: joy comes when by an act of our wills we do the right thing. Isn't that what Paul said about the Macedonians? He said, "for they gave according to their means...and beyond their means of their own free will."(v.3) You know, God gives us the power of the Holy Spirit working in our lives to help us do the right thing, but the fact is, no one--not even God--is going to make us do something we don't want to do.

You see, I know many of you this morning feel guilty because you don't tithe. You feel you ought to tithe and you want something or someone to come along and compel you to tithe. But that isn't going to happen. No, we have free will. If you want spiritual joy, by an act of your will you must decide to do the right thing. Over in Chapter 9 of I Corinthians St. Paul says the same thing again. He writes, "Each one must do as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion.." And then he adds, "For God loves a cheerful giver."

A member of the church called me up the other day and she wanted to talk about tithing. She confessed that the thought caused her anxiety because she didn't know what the future held. Well, we never do know about the future, do we? But we can't wait for ideal times or perfect circumstances to tithe. No, the joy principle is this: by an act of our own free wills we must decide.

Here is principle number two: joy comes when we care about others. I don't know about you, but I get awfully self-centered. I get focused in on me and mine and my own needs. But true joy, deep joy, lasting joy, and the best joy of all comes when we do the right thing--the best thing--for others. Have you made that discovery for your life? Does it matter to you whether or not little boys and girls learn about Jesus? Does it concern you that there are people who do not know Jesus as savior? Is it of importance to you that people are suffering and

and dying and no one cares? Yes, joy always comes when we do something loving and caring for others.

A third joy principle comes when you truly surrender your heart to Jesus. There are some of us this morning who have only heard about Jesus. We haven't read much scripture and we haven't studied much about Jesus, but we have heard about him and intellectually we accept him. But he is not a living reality in our hearts. We have no joy of the Lord. Others of us have studied diligently about him, have even studied the Bible, but we have never given our hearts to him in surrender. We don't have his joy, either. But for those who know about him--who he is, what he did, and how he wants to live in us--and have surrendered our hearts to him, he is a living reality within us that brings that joy unspeakable and full of glory.

Oh, I know there are some of us here this morning who are hungry for spiritual reality. I know there are some here this morning for whom life is not working very well. I know there are some here today who have been successful in the eyes of the world, but deep inside there is a longing and a hunger. Listen, the only thing that will meet that need, that will fill that hunger is Jesus Christ. Only when you surrender your heart to him will you have that abiding joy, that joy that never fades.

A fourth joy principle comes in doing what you can. You know, God never asks us to give what we don't have or to do what we are incapable of doing. Most of us are one or two talent people and God never asks us to go do ten talent jobs. What he does ask us to do is to be faithful with what we have. God doesn't ask you to be a solist if you can't carry a tune. God doesn't ask you to be or do anything you can't do. Isn't that a blessing? I don't have to feel guilty because I don't have the gifts or abilities you do, because God doesn't expect me to do what he calls you to do. No, God just asks us to be faithful with what we have. For the Macedonians they gave according to their means. St. Paul put it this way, "For if the readiness is there, it is acceptable according to what a man has, not according to what he has not."(v.12)

When you come to fill out your commitment card this morning, the person seated beside you may be financially able to give far more than you. But God doesn't call you to match his giving. He requires you to give according to your means. And, by the same token, the person sitting beside you may not be able to contribute nearly as much as you. But the same principle applies--give according to your means.

The greatest joy principle of all is this: to take the step of obedience. You know, there are not many things God asks me to do that I can fulfill completely. For example, he tells me to love my enemies and I do that very imperfectly. He tells me to take no thought for the morrow, but often I do worry about the future. But there is one command of God I can fulfill. He asks for a tithe and I can do that. My motives and the spirit in which I do it may often be mixed, but I can give at least a tenth. There is no greater joy in the world than to take that first step of obedience. You see, when you take that step, God begins to bless you and on that base of obedience he helps you build a spiritual life that takes you far above the spiritual poverty level.