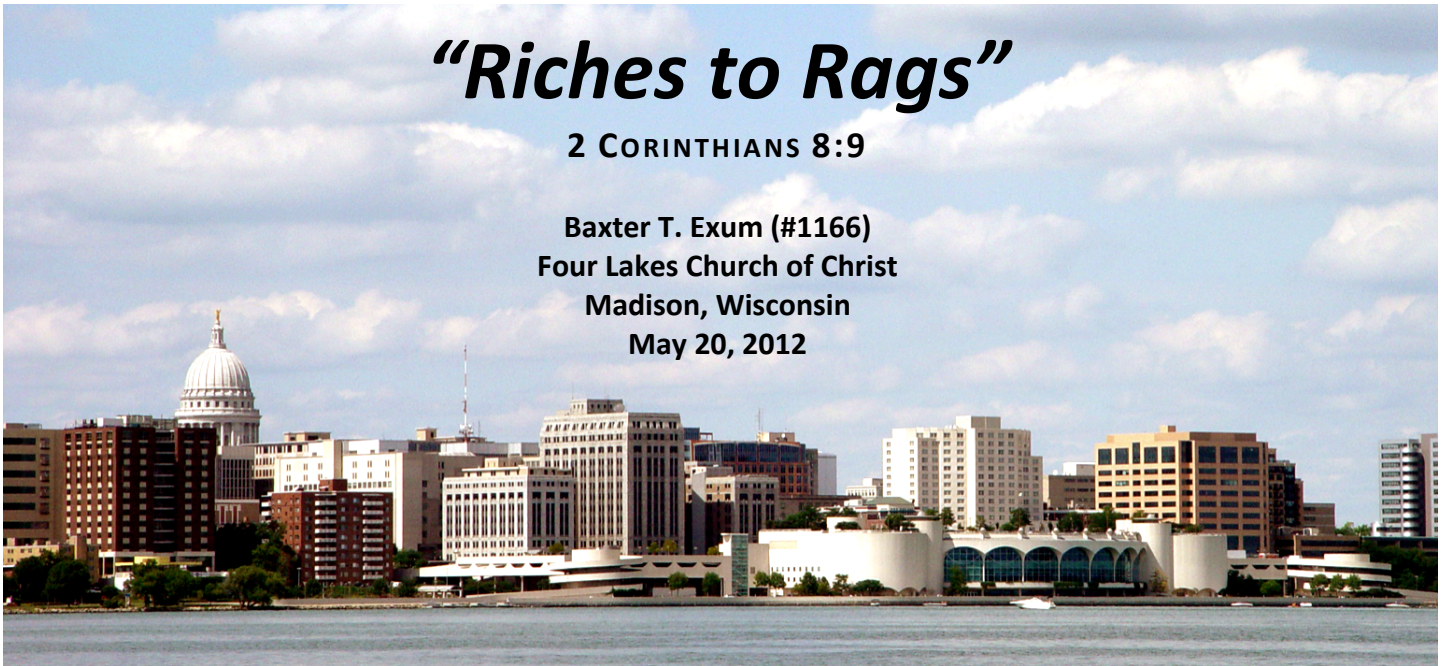


# ***“Riches to Rags”***

**2 CORINTHIANS 8:9**

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This morning I would like for us to study a sermon request that came in from one of the young people of this congregation, and it came in the form of a question – a very good question! We can certainly be thankful that the kids here are asking questions. It shows that they are eager to learn, and it certainly shows that they are curious concerning what the Bible has to say. The question, as it was very sneakily left on the keyboard of the laptop up here while I was not looking several weeks ago, is this: *Did Jesus choose to come to earth poor? If so, why?* What an interesting question! As we try to discover the answer, I would invite you to turn with me to what I have often referred to as my favorite verse in the entire Bible. We studied this verse in a slightly different way back in August 2006, but this morning our focus is different, so I would like for us to approach it with this question in mind. I am referring to Paul’s inspired words in 2 Corinthians 8:9 (p. 1812). The verse actually comes in the middle of a larger section on the subject of giving. Paul was getting ready to pass through the area to pick up a contribution that was to be used for famine relief for the saints and the other residents in the Jerusalem area. He refers to the gifts that had been given by the poor saints in Macedonia, that out of their poverty, they gave even beyond what they were able. In verse 8, he speaks of our giving as being proof concerning the sincerity of our love, and then we get to verse 9. In the middle of this discussion, it almost seems as if Paul thinks for just a moment about the grace of God, and in that moment, the apostle Paul is nearly overwhelmed – overwhelmed by the amazing grace of God. If you will, please look with me at 2 Corinthians 8:9, ***“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich.”***

I would invite you to keep your Bibles open to this passage as we study the question from one of the kids of this congregation: *Did Jesus choose to come to earth poor? If so, why?* In our society, we sometimes refer to a person going from rags to riches, and by that we mean that someone started out in poverty, but they worked hard, they fought, they studied, and eventually they grew to become very wealthy or successful. We think about great entrepreneurs like Bill Gates or even Mark Zuckerberg (as he has been in the news a lot this past week). We know what it means to go from rags to riches. But, as you can see from the image on the wall back here, the situation with Jesus is a little bit different, as the Lord went from riches to rags...in just about every possible way. This morning, then, I would like for us to notice, first of all, that Jesus was rich. Secondly, let us notice that He became poor. And then as we close, I would like for us to notice that He did this for a reason – He did this for us.

I. **But first of all, let us please notice that at one point JESUS WAS RICH.**

And as we think about the Lord being rich, let us never make the mistake of thinking that the Lord's life began at His conception or even when He was born. But instead, let us remember that the Lord Jesus was actually living long before His physical birth. In fact, it would be accurate to say that there has never been a time when Jesus did not exist. Jesus had no beginning. According to the Scriptures, He is eternal, immortal, the only wise God. And before the Lord Jesus came to this earth, it would be very accurate to say that He was rich in every possible way.

First of all, when we think about the term "*rich*" in a literal sense, the Lord Jesus (before He came to this earth) was wealthy beyond our wildest imagination. To us, when we think about being rich, maybe we think about Warren Buffet or Bill Gates. As I alluded to before, maybe we think about Mark Zuckerberg and some of the money he made this week. Even though the initial public offering of Facebook stock did not go exactly as planned, it is estimated that Mr. Zuckerberg made roughly a billion dollars on the deal. Most of us have a hard time imagining a million dollars, let alone a billion. That's a lot of money! And yet as much money as that may appear to us, God has so much more! In fact, the Lord Jesus created absolutely everything that has ever been made! In John 1:3, the Bible says, "***All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.***" Paul summarizes the situation in Colossians 1:16, "***For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities — all things have been created through Him and for Him.***" In the Old Testament (in Psalm 50), the Lord was talking about how He doesn't really need our sacrifices, how He doesn't really need our giving, and He explains it by saying, "***For every beast of the forest is Mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. I know every bird of the mountains, and everything that moves in the field is Mine. If I were hungry I would not tell you, for the world is Mine, and all it contains.***" Before Jesus came to earth, therefore, He was rich.

And yet let us not think that His great wealth was merely physical. Just as with us today, wealth and riches can be a lot more than money and possessions and stuff. Many years ago, I remember my grandfather talking about how important it is for us to take care of ourselves, and he said, "If you lose your health, nothing else really matters." And I know what he was saying. He was saying that there are some things that money cannot buy. And the same was true of the Lord. He was rich in glory. Before He came to this earth, the Lord enjoyed the constant praise of heaven. Several times in the Bible, the door to heaven cracks open just a little bit, and we find that there are creatures surrounding the throne of God, and these creatures are constantly praising God. I know that Conner, and Drew, and Tabitha studied this not too long ago in their class on Wednesday evening. You talk about a class of kids having some good questions – Keola and Patsy let them decide what to study, and several months ago, they chose the Old Testament book of Ezekiel! And you guys might remember those four living creatures from Ezekiel 1. They had wings, and strange faces, and they would hover, and all that. We have a similar picture in the book of Revelation, a book written maybe 700 years later. In Revelation 4, we find that those four creatures are still there, and when the door to heaven cracks open again, John tells us that day and night those four creatures do not cease to say, "***Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God, the Almighty, who was and who is and who is to come.***" Before He came to this earth, therefore, the Lord Jesus enjoyed the constant praise of those creatures.

Beyond this, the Lord also enjoyed unlimited power and authority. The world itself was created by the word of Jesus. He enjoyed unity together with the two other parts of the Godhead – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit were One, and there was a depth to that relationship that we may never fully comprehend. And the point of all of these comments so far is simply to remind us that before He came to this earth in human form,

the Lord was rich in every possible way. In fact, He was rich from eternity – there had never been a time when He was not rich as only God can be rich.

**II. However, according to Paul in 2 Corinthians 8:9, there was a time when JESUS CHRIST DECIDED TO BECOME POOR.**

And once again, just as we struggle to understand what it means to be truly rich, most of us here this morning will probably never understand what it means to be truly poor. We think we know what poor is, but most of us really have no idea what true poverty really is. There was a time in our lives when we couldn't afford a refrigerator, and so we had one of those little dorm-size fridges sitting where the real refrigerator was supposed to go, and yet we were not truly poor at that point. We had plastic lawn furniture instead of couches and chairs in our living room, and yet we were not truly poor. We had a mattress on the floor without a bedframe for the first six months or so of our marriage, and yet we were not truly poor. We've been through some situations where we might have thought we were poor at the time, but most of us really do not know what poverty really is. Like some of you, I have been on some visits to drop off food to people in this community, to people who call claiming that they have nothing to eat. And yet on many of those visits, I have seen some of the nicest 50" plasma TV's. I've seen gaming systems that our children can only dream of. Most of us in our society do not really understand poverty.

So maybe we are at a little bit of a disadvantage here, but what does Paul mean when he says that the Lord "*became poor*"? It means that the Lord willingly gave up all of that stuff that we just talked about a few minutes ago. Physically speaking, He gave up the riches, and power, and praise of heaven. He laid aside the glory of heaven and he chose to be conceived and then born – born like the rest of us. It would have been shocking enough for God to come to earth as a man, but He didn't even come as a man – He came as a baby. He was conceived, He lived inside Mary for nine months, and then He was born. And yet even the Lord's birth was far beneath what most of us are familiar with. Several years ago, I told you about a discussion we had with our neighbors from India, as the man in that family made the comment that children here in Madison are born like kings and queens. And he is so right. One of my own was born here, and I have also visited a number of you in the two maternity wards here in Madison. We have some of the most well-educated and highly trained doctors on the planet. We have nurses and midwives who coach and take care of the smallest of needs. They will bring you ice chips with a spoon, and popsicles, and you even get to order the kind of food you want for dinner. I know some people might complain about hospital food, but in my opinion, the best part was the food! Over at Meriter Hospital, they even have an entire room stocked with food just for the dads. I had read that the number one cause for dads fainting in the delivery room was a lack of food – that they are so busy caring for their wives that they forget to eat. Well, I determined that I was not going to faint – and that required eating large amounts of food in the hospital! So, I took advantage of the "Father's Food Room." There was to be no fainting in the Exum family! They had bread, and luncheon meat, and fresh lettuce – the kind we can't even afford at home – and I ate better there than I do in most nice restaurants! In the delivery room itself, there are the luxurious hardwood floors, and the whirlpool tubs, and the lights that come down from the ceiling, and the view looking out over Madison, and the CD players, and the televisions, and the nice bed for dad over in the corner, and the privacy curtains, and the blankets that have been warmed in a special cabinet – get that: Blankets that have been warmed!

But Jesus was not born in Madison, was He? He was born in a stable, in a barn – some have suggested that He was born in a cave. The Bible doesn't really say, other than the fact that He was born somewhere where the farmers kept their animals – the Bible tells us that when He was born, the Lord was placed in a manger. And you know, as I think about it, I don't know whether most kids here this morning have even SEEN a manger!

Most people today don't even know what a manger is! A manger is simply a feeding trough. The closest I have come to a manger is probably on my grandparents' small farm down near Nashville. Back when they had cows, our family would travel down from the Chicago area, and it was a big deal. We would go in the barn and climb up the steep, narrow stairs (basically a ladder) to the loft in the barn, we would cut open a bale of hay, and we would go over and throw some of it down through a hole in the floor, and it would land in a cage underneath where the cows could get to it. You didn't want to just throw it on the floor of the barn. There wasn't really a floor as far as I could tell, because you couldn't see it (if you know what I mean)! This was the place where cows hung out, and the floor was always covered, and it did not smell good! But that is where the cows ate, and I guess that "cage" over in the corner, made out of 2x4's is the closest I have ever been to a manger. Jesus, then, was not born in a palace or in a modern hospital, but He was born with the animals.

The Bible tells us that His earthly father was a carpenter. We also know that Joseph and Mary were so poor that when the time came for them to present a sacrifice at the temple for having a first-born son, they could not afford the one-year old lamb that was required, so they had to go with Plan B. In those situations where the young couple could not afford a lamb, there was a backup plan in Leviticus 12:8. The poor were allowed to substitute two turtledoves or two young pigeons. And so we have Jesus, the Lamb of God, born into a family that so poor that they could not even afford the sacrifice of a real lamb when He was born! So, He was born, not as a royal baby, not as the son of a king, not as a son of privilege, but instead, He was born into poverty – the kind of poverty that most of us here this morning cannot even imagine!

And then, as the Lord grew up, the financial situation did not get much better. As an adult, even as the Creator of all things, Jesus Himself said (in Matthew 8:20), ***"The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head."*** We learn from that passage that as an adult, the Lord was basically homeless. He bounced around and stayed in the homes of various friends and supporters, but the Lord had nowhere He could call home, nowhere to go at the end of each day. And for the most part, His followers were also poor. These were men who had to wander through fields eating the grain as they walked along. These were men who were unable to pay taxes without the miracle of pulling a small coin from the mouth of a fish. These were men who were completely unable to feed the crowds that followed.

As we go back to 2 Corinthians 8:9, then, let us remember that Jesus was rich, but at one point He decided to leave all of it behind. He experienced poverty, and racial hatred, and prejudice, and injustice. In fact, the apostle Paul would go on to write to another poor congregation in Macedonia, and He goes into greater detail. In Philippians 2:6-8, he refers to Jesus Christ, ***"...who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."*** His parents had to borrow a manger to put Him in when He was born, and when He died He had to borrow a tomb in which to be buried. The Lord (in a very literal sense) gave up riches for poverty.

But there is another aspect of the Lord's poverty that we need to consider here, and that is, the Lord Jesus (at least temporarily) gave up the close fellowship that He had with His Father in heaven. And that's what Paul meant in Philippians when He said that the Lord ***"emptied Himself."*** He poured Himself out into human form. Many years ago, C.S. Lewis pictured it with this scenario: Imagine your dog being in some kind of trouble, but imagine not being able to truly understand what your dog was going through without actually becoming a dog. How many of us would give up being human to become a dog? For 33 years? Imagine giving up our close friendships. Imagine giving up our opposable thumbs! Imagine leaving our loved ones, our jobs, our hobbies. Imagine giving up our appreciation of art and literature and music. Imagine giving all of this up, all so that we

could go around wagging our tails and panting, unable to smile or speak. And yet that comparison perhaps helps us to understand (in at least some small way) what the Lord was willing to do. He gave up riches, and fellowship, and the constant praise and glory of heaven in order to pour Himself out into human form.

- III. **This, of course, brings us back to the question from one of our young people, and that is: WHY? Did Jesus choose to come to earth poor? If so, WHY? And as we go back to 2 Corinthians 8:9, I would suggest that HE DID IT FOR US.**

***“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich.”*** So, yes, the Lord decided to come to this earth in poverty – He made that decision for a reason, and the reason is: He did it for us, so that we, through His poverty might become rich. And yet as we sit here in this air-conditioned building on these nice padded pews, I am afraid that it is very easy to lose the power of what Paul has written. Jesus gave up heaven and became poor for each of us here this morning! He did this so that each one of us ***“through His poverty might become rich.”***

But back to the question, very specifically: Why did Jesus come as a poor man? Why not come as a king, or a prince, or a wealthy landowner, or even as some kind of great military leader? Specifically, why come in poverty? Perhaps the closest the Bible gets to answering this question is in Hebrews 2. The question in that chapter concerns why Jesus had to die, but the author of Hebrews, I believe, has something to say in our discussion this morning. In Hebrews 2:17-18, the Bible says (concerning Jesus), ***“Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted.”*** As I see it, then, the Lord came in a form where he would experience the worst that this world had to offer. In other words, if He had come to this earth as a rich man, the poor might have said, “Oh, but Lord, you don’t know what it’s like!” And so, by being born into poverty, the Lord became a merciful and faithful high priest. He was tempted through the things that he suffered, so that he can come to the aid of those who are tempted. As we sometimes sing, “No friend like Him is so high and holy, no friend like Him is so meek and lowly – Jesus knows all about our struggles!” And so, by coming to this earth in poverty, the Lord can empathize with people in all circumstances. He knows what it is to be rich, and He also knows what it is to be poor. He gave up the wealth of heaven, then, for our benefit, so that we might become rich.

The wealth Paul speaks of here, though, is not physical. The Lord did not give up the riches of heaven to come here so that we can all be millionaires! Instead, the context indicates that we are talking about some kind of spiritual wealth, some kind of spiritual benefit. And when we read the Scriptures, we find a lot about this. In Ephesians 3:8, for example, Paul referred to this grace once again and said, ***“To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ.”*** As I see it, then, we are talking about a spiritual blessing. We are talking about salvation. And I say this because of how the Bible portrays gold. Certainly gold is one of our most precious metals, and yet do you remember how gold is used in heaven? We are told in Revelation 21:21 that the street in heaven is made of ***“pure gold.”*** In heaven, the pavement is made of gold! How does God view gold? Pretty much the same way we look at asphalt or concrete. The ***“riches of Christ,”*** then, are not silver and gold. But instead, the ***“riches”*** referred to in 2 Corinthians 8:9 must refer to spiritual blessings – it has to refer to salvation. This is the grace Paul was talking about: Jesus gave up the riches of heaven, He came to earth in poverty, so that we can be blessed spiritually.

As we think about that exchange that was made on our behalf, I am reminded of the decision made by George Washington Carver. Born to slaves near the end of the Civil War, Mr. Carver eventually worked and studied his way to a point where he received a number of lucrative offers. Apparently he was offered \$100,000 to come work for Thomas Edison. A similar offer was made by Henry Ford to come work at the Ford Motor Company, but instead, Mr. Carver decided to live in the south, in relative poverty, wearing the same suit for 40 years, so that he could work with Booker T. Washington at the struggling Tuskegee Institute. When friends argued that he would be able to help a lot more people with that kind of money, Mr. Carver replied, "If I had all that money, I might forget about my people." On his tombstone are these words, "He could have added fortune to fame, but caring for neither, he found happiness and honor in being helpful to the world." In a much greater sense, that is what the Lord has done for us. He gave up heaven so that we could gain something far greater than riches.

### **Conclusion:**

As we close our thoughts on this question from one of our young people concerning why Jesus chose to come to this earth poor, I'd like for us to think about this for just a second: If Jesus gave up riches so that we could become rich, that makes us rich. We have been made rich by His poverty, which means that we are now where Jesus began – we are rich with spiritual blessings. The question now is: What do we do with these blessings? Unless I have missed something, that seems to be the point of 2 Corinthians 8-9! Paul was saying: Now that you are rich, now that you have experienced the grace of God, now it is up to you to go out and share those blessings. We, then, follow the example of Christ by passing along some of what He has given to us. As Paul said in Philippians 2:5, we are to ***"...have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus."*** In other words, since Jesus emptied Himself into the form of a servant, then we can also do the same for others. And because of God's amazing grace, the Christians in Macedonia considered it a great privilege (and not a burden) to give freely – even to the point of begging for the opportunity to give more and more. By the way, in the very next chapter (in 2 Corinthians 9:7), we find that, ***"Each one must do just as he has purposed in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver."*** God loves a cheerful giver, because His Son is a cheerful giver. As we go back home, and to school, and to work this week, I hope that we will be able to give to others just as Christ gave for us. And I would also say "thank you" to the awesome kid who made such an interesting request!

We know what God did for us – He sent Jesus on a mission, on a mission to die on the cross as the perfect sacrifice. We accept that sacrifice by turning away from sin, we confess the name of Christ – that He is the Son of God, and then we allow ourselves to be briefly dipped in water for the forgiveness of our sins. If you have something we need to pray about as a congregation, we would invite you to write it down and pass it to the front. But if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

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