

The Ministry of Giving

2 Corinthians 8:7-15

7 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. 8 I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. 9 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. 10 And in this matter, I am giving my advice: it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something— 11 now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means. 12 For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have. 13 I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between 14 your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. 15 As it is written, "The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little."

In an article by Amanda Postma on November 16, 2020, we learned about the most generous states in the United States of America. She says: The average American spends about \$1,050 on things like gifts, travel and other goodies. On average, the American household donates \$2,520 a year to charities. Typically, people will wait to donate at the end of each year. In fact, around 34% of all donations are collected in the last three months of the year. This made us curious to see who was the most generous in the country.

By looking over the percent of income donated to charity, how many people volunteer and the average volunteer hours, we were able to determine that these 10 states are the most generous: Utah, Idaho, Kansas, Alaska, Oregon, Nebraska, Minnesota, Washington, Wyoming, and Oklahoma.

Generosity flows through these states throughout the entire year, not just during the holiday season. From donating money to donating their time, these states know how to help those in need. Each state was equally ranked 1-to-50 in 3 categories:

- Percent of income donated to charity
- Percent of residents who volunteer
- Average Yearly Volunteer Hours

This looks at the two things most people have to give- money and time. Michigan ranked 23rd out of 50 with 32.2 % of Michiganders volunteering their time, about 36 hours each year; and donate 4.5% of income to charity.

Getting a congregation to dig deep into its pockets is a task as old as Christianity itself. It has never been easy. Paul faced the task squarely in 2 Corinthians 8-9 with a double-barreled effort to raise money from well-to-do people not eager to part with what they had. Because the Jerusalem "mother church" was poor, Paul urged the more prosperous Corinthians to do the right thing.

We suspect that when the Christians of Corinth gathered for worship there was no six-foot thermometer indicating that they had already achieved 45 percent of their goal for the relief of the church in Jerusalem, no posters featuring heart-tugging pictures of widows and orphans. Terms we take for granted, like "budget goal," would likely have caused Paul great offense. Yet he wrote these words conscious of tensions familiar to us today.

Paul's mission in our scripture was to get the more prosperous new churches in Greece and Asia Minor to provide economic assistance for fellow followers of Christ. Our passage represents the heart of Paul's appeal to the Corinthian Christians to fulfill their pledge to the collection for "the poor among the saints at Jerusalem" (Rom. 15:26), a project whose great importance to the apostle is evident also from his earlier remarks to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 16:1-4) and to the Galatians (2:9-10). But "collection" (*logeia*, a term he uses only in 1 Cor. 16:1, 2), hardly captures the significance of the enterprise. In words just prior to our passage, he says that this "relief work" (*diakonia*) is both a work of "grace" and an act of Christian "fellowship" (8:4), that is, a tangible gesture of gospel solidarity and love (see 8:8) between Gentiles and Jews.

The significance of this relief effort becomes manifest in our passage as Paul's appeal to the Corinthian church unfolds. He held up before them the example of the Macedonian Christians (8:1-5). Paul describes the way the Macedonian churches, and probably those

in Philippi and Thessalonica, have participated in this ministry of giving (v. 1). They were willing to give during "a severe ordeal of affliction" and out of "their extreme poverty" (v. 2). The Macedonians begged him and his coworkers to take part in the collection (v. 4); he also tells of the Macedonians' desire to give themselves to the Lord and to Paul and his coworkers (v. 5). The Macedonians, who excelled in the ministry of giving are presented as harmonious, of goodwill, generous, sincere, deeply and fervently pious, and strongly affectionate toward Paul and his coworkers.

He now addresses the Corinthians directly. Rather than trying to arouse a sense of competition with other churches, Paul reminds them of their own qualities and accomplishments. He points out their good qualities, saying that they too excel in the qualities they value most—faith, speech, knowledge, utmost eagerness, and love. These qualities should drive them to give because they are in a superior position to do so in comparison to the Macedonians, and yet the Macedonians were able to give in such a way that their act was an act of piety and not just of generosity.

For Paul, this ministry of giving is an "act of grace" (ESV) or "generous undertaking" (NRSV). But gratitude cannot be compelled, and Paul assures them that his counsel is not a command but an appeal to show "that your love also is genuine" (v. 8).

Paul was honest and accurate in his praise of this community: the Corinthians were a bright and talented bunch, passionately committed to excelling in all matters. This passion had a dark side: their penchant for spiritual one-upmanship that had led the community into division and chaos. He saw them as they were and as they can be even our flaws and weaknesses are precious to God, who can transform them to virtues and strengths. Striving for excellence is a Christian virtue only when "excellence" is properly defined. Like a wise parent, Paul seeks to redirect their passion for excellence to a worthy purpose.

Then Paul reaches the real heart of his appeal: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his

poverty you might become rich" (v. 9). Here we have not only a summary of the gospel itself but also a description of what has been called "the economy of God," a metaphor rooted in the New Testament (as in Col. 1:25) and developed extensively by the church fathers, the "divine economy." God's saving act of grace in Jesus Christ is also the model for our "economics" as Christians. Paul uses the rest of our passage to spell out the implications of this economy with reference to the Corinthians' contribution to the saints at Jerusalem. Paul first says something about what makes a gift "acceptable," starting with the "readiness" to give, which the Corinthians had demonstrated the previous year by pledging their support. Now Paul exhorts them to complete their own act of grace by actually contributing what they have promised.

An "economic" question remains: how much should they give? (Some have even surmised that this issue might explain their delay in contributing.) Paul tells them to complete their contribution "out of what you have" (v. 11b), adding that a gift is "acceptable according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have" (v. 12), and that he does not mean that "others should be eased and you burdened" (v. 13a). Paul's economic is about "equality," "fairness," or "fair balance." Calvin comments that Paul does not mean the kind of equality where "each side gives an equal amount" but rather "a fair apportioning." The term clearly involves a notion of reciprocity, as shown by the relationship between Jesus Christ and believers (v. 9) and by Paul's claim that "your abundance at the present time should supply their need, so that their abundance may supply your need, that there may be fairness (v. 14). Commentators differ on whether this reciprocity involves material resources only or also spiritual.

Certainly, the needs of the Jerusalem Christians were real, but also in Paul's mind the fragile unity of Christ's church hinged upon the success of this collection. Would there be one church for Jews, one for Gentiles, or would Christ's body remain united? Practical concerns and spiritual ideals were deeply interwoven in his appeal.

Paul insists that excellence in financial stewardship or the ministry of giving is not defined by giving a sum large enough to earn naming rights for the new wing. Rather it begins with humble gratitude for God's self-emptying in Christ—that prompts an eagerness to give in response. A year before, Paul notes, many were not only setting money aside each week for the Jerusalem church, but filled with the desire to do so. Paul speaks of recapturing that eagerness to express gratitude to God. The larger gifts offered by the wealthier members of the community are not more "excellent" than the smaller gifts given by those of more modest means, for excellence in the ministry of Christian giving is measured not in dollars but by the desire to give, which stems from gratitude to God.

In addition to expressing gratitude to God, Christians are called to give out of genuine love for their brothers and sisters. As Paul insists elsewhere, Christ died for all persons, not just those who have responded by placing their faith in him, so we are called to love all those who are beloved by our Savior. But fellow members of Christ's body constitute a special category: if they live in need while we know abundance, the entire body is wounded.

Paul asked the Corinthians to weigh their present abundance against the needs of the saints in Jerusalem. He does not ask the Corinthians to give so sacrificially that the equation becomes reversed ("I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you," v. 13), but rather to be so claimed by charity that their deepest need is to share their abundance with brothers and sisters who are less materially blessed.

Paul reassures them that he is not asking for them to give so that they will be put into hardship, but so that there is "fair balance" between their abundance and the Jerusalem churches' needs (vv. 13-14). He says that the Corinthians need not go to the extent of becoming poor, as Christ did, so that the Jerusalem churches can become rich, but he is challenging the economic disparity between the Corinthians and the Jerusalem churches, and he is calling the Corinthians to correct this disparity. This is reminiscent of the way

that Acts describes the idyllic communal life of the earliest group of post-Pentecost believers. In Acts 2:44-47, the early believers "had all things in common" and "they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need." In Acts 4:32-37, "no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.... There was not a needy person among them." Similar to what Paul is saying in our passage, Acts describes the ideal of economic balance where all those who have needs are attended to through the generosity of the community. Paul seems to be trying to create such a dynamic among the communities he founded; he is trying to get the Corinthians to think beyond their borders so that the needs of the poor can be met through the desire of the Corinthians to give out of their abundance.

We have to be careful not to measure worth and success through personal wealth and material possessions. Although this is not a modern invention, we seem to have taken its excesses to new heights. Members of the comparatively affluent Gentile churches struggled with the same temptation to "give a little something" to those in need without compromising their own lifestyles and were prone to measure their giving against their peers. "Did we give more to the relief offering than the Galatians did? Did our church make the 'top five' list?" **John T. Mcfadden**

We give of our substance, of ourselves, because we have ourselves been given to. All giving, therefore, is ultimately a giving back. He was not asking for the moon or exhorting the congregation to give everything away. Rather, with the needs of Jerusalem in mind, he was asking for something manageable: "a fair balance between your present abundance and their need" (vv. 13-14). Christ gave up everything for them; what portion of their abundance can they give to a brother or sister in Christ who stands in need? The body of Christ should take care of itself, whether at home (with members of the local congregation who are not so well off) or abroad (be it in Jerusalem or Macedonia). Finally, Paul appeals to a scriptural example of economic reciprocity by citing, nearly

verbatim from the Greek Old Testament, a passage about the bread from heaven that the Israelites ate in the wilderness (Exod. 16:18): "Whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack" (8:15) or "The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little" (v. 15). **Peter S.**

Hawkins

We are to look to God to overcome our crippling fear that if we share our abundance with others there will not be enough left for us and turn that into joyous trust in the God who provides for all our needs. Replacing fear with trust is the most challenging, and most rewarding, transformation of all as we express our ministry of giving. **Garrett**

Green and Stephen P. Ahearne-Kroll

You and I, like the Christians at Corinth are called to give generously, out of love for what God has given to us; to show love for our brothers and sisters in need; and to support our unity as members of the Body of Christ.

[David L. Bartlett (2013). Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Westminster John Knox Press. Retrieved from <https://app.wordsearchbible.lifeway.com>]