



“Engaging in Giving”

Luke 9:23-25; Philippians 2:1-11

There’s no denying it. Our giving reflects our commitment to God’s work, the Missio Dei. The Macedonian Christians understood and begged to help!

Like the rest of Paul’s writings in the New Testament, 2 Corinthians is correspondence. Indeed, 2 Corinthians is perhaps pieces of two or three of Paul’s letters to the Christians in Corinth that were later stitched together and circulated throughout the larger Christian community.

Rather than seeing this passage as some mere “stewardship brochure,” we need to hear it as an appeal from pastor to congregation, an appeal that strikes all the right notes as Paul speaks to them, and to us, about “this ministry of giving.”

The example of the Macedonians

Paul opens his appeal to the Corinthians by pointing them toward the giving of the Christians in Macedonia, which included at least the communities in Thessalonica, Philippi, and Berea. Despite their extreme poverty and even persecution, the Macedonian Christians have given freely. “Their wonderful joy and deep poverty have overflowed in their generosity,” Paul writes. The Macedonians begged again and again for the privilege in sharing in the collection for Jerusalem. Indeed, they exceeded Paul’s highest hopes, as their giving was an outgrowth of their dedication to Jesus.

In Paul’s world, people learned nearly everything by modeling others. It is natural for Paul to lift up the Macedonians as role models so that the Corinthians might learn about Christian giving. Of course, Paul knows that comparisons can be dangerous. They are even more so in our world. I doubt many stewardship appeals begin by talking about the generosity of another congregation! But Paul has softened the comparison by emphasizing that this is God’s work. God has been kind to the Macedonians, opening their hearts and giving them direction. The Macedonians’ joyful giving is not really so much about them as it is about God and more specifically, the *Missio Dei*—the Mission of God.

PAUL’S COLLECTION FOR JERUSALEM

In his letter to the Galatians (2:1-10), Paul tells the story of a meeting in Jerusalem to settle the question of whether Gentile converts must first become Jews to become followers of Jesus; namely, whether they must be circumcised and keep the Law (see Acts 15 also).

The leaders of the Christian community, James, Peter, and John (the “pillars” as Paul describes them) agree with Paul that circumcision was not a requirement. All that marks out the body of Christ is faith in Christ. They also agree on a division of labor. James and the other pillars will continue to work among their fellow Jews, bringing to them the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul (and Barnabas) would go to the Gentiles.

All that the pillars ask of Paul and Barnabas is that they “remember the poor,” which Paul is “eager to do” (Galatians 2:10). This seems at first glance like a general request, but we find in Paul’s letters that this is a specific mission. The “poor” in mind here are the poverty-stricken among the Christian community in Jerusalem, all of whom are Jews who have embraced Jesus as Messiah. Indeed, most scholars agree that poverty characterized the entire Christian community in Jerusalem. There were surely a variety of factors at work, such as persecution by the Jewish authorities and a series of bad harvests in the mid-forties AD. The Christians’ practice of using capital to meet current needs (the selling of property described in Acts 4 and 5) may also have contributed.

In any event, Paul undertakes throughout his missionary travels to collect money that he and a large contingent of Gentile Christians plan to take to Jerusalem. It seems that his appeal met with little success in the churches of Galatia but, as in today’s passage, was embraced beyond his expectations by the churches in Macedonia (i.e., Thessalonica and Philippi). The Christians in Corinth had made a commitment to the collection and Paul urges them to follow through on their commitment (2 Corinthians 8:10-11).

Paul embraces this collection for the poor believers in Jerusalem as an act of compassion, but also as enacted theology. For Paul, the collection is a concrete way of demonstrating the unity of the church – Gentile believers helping Jewish believers. Paul knows with how suspiciously many Jewish believers have viewed his ministry to the Gentiles. When not the specific subject at hand, these divisions are an important subtext in many of Paul’s letters. Paul preaches unity, but he is a wise man who knows that money can sometimes talk louder than words.

In the same way, Paul emphasizes what God has done for the Corinthian Christians -- they have such faith, such knowledge, such enthusiasm, such love. Paul prays that they will also now share in the ministry of giving. They don’t have to. This is not about requirements. The Macedonians gave “of their own free will” (v. 3). Paul isn’t saying the

Corinthians have to participate in the collection, but he does remind them of others' eagerness to share. More pointedly, Paul says that participating in the campaign is one way for the Corinthians to prove that their love is real (v. 8)!¹ And just so the Corinthians don't lose sight of what really matters, Paul points them toward Christ, who gave up all the riches of heaven for them, so that they would be rich in what really matters – fellowship with God and one another.²

Advice: Finish what you started

Paul's relationship with the Corinthians has been strained, so he walks carefully here. Paul is not commanding them to do anything. Instead, he urges them to finish what they started a year before. Evidently, they had made commitments to Paul that he now hopes they will fulfill.

Paul is a practical man. Commitments made need to be fulfilled. Everyone needs to participate. Those who have more ought to give more. Those who have less ought to give less. Those with more now might one day have less and be in need. Those with less now might one day have more and be able to help those in need. Paul urges these Christians to give proportionally so that there might be greater equality. Bear in mind, Paul lived in a world of scarcity. He isn't speaking of equal abundance here (v. 13), but of equal poverty so that the needs of all will be met. We can also be sure that Paul's definition of "needs" would be much different from our own. For Paul, unity in the body of Christ would necessarily mean that the needs of all the saints would be met. Caring for one another is simply a given, both in the immediate community and in the larger body.

What Paul wants the Corinthians to see more than anything else is the eagerness and joy with which the poverty-ridden, persecuted Macedonian Christians participated in his collection. For them, Paul's campaign to help the poor in Jerusalem is not an obligation but a "gracious privilege." Paul hopes that God will ignite a similar passion for giving among the Christians in Corinth. In the same way, we have prayed this year that God would ignite a true passion for giving in the hearts of us all.

A few thoughts and questions for reflection

1. You might begin by sharing your own reaction to the begging of the Macedonian Christians. How do you imagine they came to such commitment amid all their troubles? We often seek to escape from life's afflictions and can come to think of faith as an escape, even a tool. Tune in any of the "wealthy and prosperity" preachers on television and you'll hear that message on an endless loop. But the Macedonian Christians have found joy and peace amid their poverty. As J. Paul Sampley notes, they have discovered that their poverty is not a sign of God's absence. Rather, their joy and peace in its midst is "a sure sign of God's power." We live in varying degrees of dramatic abundance, yet joy and peace so often allude us. How might our own giving be a path to the peace we seek?
2. Perhaps the key is to see that Paul does not use the language of obligation or even obedience. Instead, Paul speaks of wonderful joy . . . rich generosity . . . gracious privilege of sharing . . . dedicate themselves to the Lord . . . ministry of giving . . . give whatever you can according to what you have. Paul understands that this is all God's work. It is God who "in his kindness" opened the hearts of the Macedonians to rich generosity. In the same way, if you talk to those who tithe, most (all?) will tell you that it begins with a transformed heart. It must begin with the heart because beginning to tithe takes trust. Perhaps this is what Paul means when he hopes that the Corinthians will excel in giving as they've excelled at so much else. He wants them to excel in their trust of God, in their faith in God, and he knows that their generous giving will be the certain outgrowth of that trust. Not many Christians tithe or get anywhere near it. Why is it so hard for us to trust?
3. In his commentary on Paul's letter, Sampley tells the story of a church whose members decided that in addition to their regular annual financial pledge, they would give to missions 10% of all the money they received unexpectedly – gifts, repayment of written-off debts, money that had been found, etc. They committed themselves to giving away 10% of all the little moments of abundance that popped up in their lives. How might you put such a plan into practice in your own life and family? How much money might we be talking about? How could we include our children as part of this? If our entire congregation practiced this, how much money might we raise for missions? What might we learn?

¹ I'd guess that a lot of pastors read verse 8 of this passage and say to themselves, "I'm glad Paul said it, because I never could." Giving money as a proof of one's love! It seems so . . . concrete. Clichés are clichés for a reason, they often carry truth. In essence, Paul says, "Put your money where your mouth is." Tough...but true.

² The best way to grasp Paul's meaning here is to read the Christ-hymn of Philippians 2:5-11. Any sacrifice that we might be asked to make pales next to the sacrifices Jesus made for our sake. This is why Paul can hardly find a subject that he doesn't take to the cross for understanding. Sacrifice is the essence of Christian love.