

The Gift of Giving
II Corinthians 8:1-15

“You must support this offering for the poor Christians in Jerusalem – it is your solemn duty.” Now, Paul certainly could have issued such a commandment. After all, the very first verse of this letter tells us that he was an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God. He reminds his readers of his apostolic authority in chapter 10. Moreover, Paul had been the organizing pastor of the Christian congregation in Corinth, spending 18 months there about five years earlier. If anyone had a right to tell the Corinthian Christians what to do, it was Paul. And Paul could have added even more weight to his command. After all, Acts chapter 11 tells how Paul and Barnabas had travelled from Antioch to Jerusalem to bring an earlier gift to the victims of the famine there. It was at that time that Paul probably met with James and Peter and John who, according to Galatians chapter 2, welcomed him into the Christian ministry. At that time, these other apostles urged Paul to remember the poor, in other words to continue his efforts to help those who were needy. And so, when Paul wrote to the Corinthians, he could have appealed not only to his own apostolic authority but to that of Peter, James, and John to command his readers to make a gift to the poor.

But isn't it interesting that nowhere in this passage or in this whole letter does Paul pull rank where it comes to the issue of contributions. Instead in verse 8, he makes it quite clear that his request for funds is not a commandment. He makes this point again in chapter 9 verse 5 – whatever the Corinthians choose to give should be willing, not an exaction. Christians then are free to give, but should never feel forced to give.

Well, perhaps Paul could have said something like this: “Corinthians, you have so much wealth. How can you live with yourselves, knowing that there are so many others around the world who have so much less?” Perhaps you've heard that sort of stewardship message, a message that centers around guilt. And it is certainly the case that we Americans are blessed with riches that are simply beyond the wildest dreams of most of the people of the world.

Corinth was in a similar situation. The city was located at a crossroads for sea and land traffic in Greece, and as a result it was a bustling prosperous center of trade. And Paul's earlier letter to this same church indicates that at least some of the members were making quite a comfortable living. Clearly, they could afford to help those who had much less than they did.

But just as Paul refuses to browbeat his readers into participating in this fundraising effort, Paul also refuses to manipulate his readers with guilt. He doesn't even mention the desperate straits in which the Jerusalem Christians found themselves because of persecution. He doesn't try

to make the Corinthians feel bad because they have more material blessings than the Jerusalem Christians did. No, if Christians should never give out of compulsion, we should also not feel pressured to give to assuage our feelings of guilt.

So, how does Paul seek to motivate the Corinthians to support the relief effort for the suffering, persecuted Christians in Jerusalem? The first thing he does is to give them a good example, that of the Macedonian churches such as those in Philippi and Thessalonica.

Now to the readers of Paul's day, such a comparison would seem a bit odd. After all, Corinth was a wealthy, cosmopolitan center of trade. In contrast, the churches in Philippi and Thessalonica suffered, as Paul says in verse 2, from both poverty and the affliction of persecution. What could the rich Corinthians possibly learn about giving from the poor Philippians and Thessalonians? Indeed, the Macedonian Christians might have been just as needy as the saints in Jerusalem for whom Paul was taking up the collection.

But that, it turns out, is precisely Paul's point. Verse 3 says that the poor Macedonians gave according to their ability – they didn't have as much, so of course they couldn't give as much. But at the same time, the poor Christians of Macedonia gave beyond their ability, giving a much greater percentage of their limited means than could reasonably be expected.

Perhaps you remember another example of such selfless giving, the widow whom Jesus observed making a contribution to the temple in Jerusalem. She only had two tiny copper coins, but she gave both of them to the work of the Lord. She held nothing back.

In the same way, the Macedonian Christians, in spite of their affliction and deep poverty, gave liberally to help others who suffered, to help others who had very little. That's the sort of giving that Jesus and Paul want us to emulate.

But if the Macedonians gave a shockingly large percentage of their income to the poor, their attitude toward their giving was perhaps even more amazing. They didn't wait for Paul to beg them to give to the collection for Jerusalem – indeed, it probably didn't occur to Paul to ask such poor people to participate in such a fundraising campaign. Instead, verse 4 says that these poor Macedonians begged Paul to be allowed to give. They wanted to join in the effort to help the needy saints in Jerusalem, even if they couldn't afford to contribute very much. They were thus not only willing to give when asked – they asked for the privilege of giving.

Why were these poor Macedonian Christians so eager? Why were they so anxious to help others? Verse 5 gives us a clue – they had first given themselves to the Lord. As Christians, they knew that everything they had – indeed, everything that they were was really a gift from God. The

farthest thing from their minds was to withhold any of God's good gifts from those who were in need, regardless of how needy they themselves might have been.

But as these Macedonians gave so generously, so sacrificially, so lovingly, they nevertheless sought none of the credit. Verse 5 says instead that they gave to the poor in Jerusalem "by the will of God." Paul makes this same point in verse 1 – the generosity of the Christians in Macedonia was a spiritual blessing bestowed on them by the grace of God. It was God Who gave the Macedonians such generous hearts. It was God Who gave them such a burning desire to help others. And so God should get the lion's share of the credit for their amazing generosity.

But to those Macedonian Christians and to Paul such selfless, generous giving was the only fitting thing for followers of Christ to do. For verse 9 reminds us that the Lord Jesus Christ did the same sort of thing – though He was rich, yet for our sakes He became poor, that we through His poverty might become rich.

What does this mean? Well, we can't deny that Jesus started out with the greatest of heavenly riches. Jesus has always existed as the Son of God the Father. Jesus is the eternal Word of God, the means by which the Father spoke the universe into existence. Everything was created through Him and for Him – Jesus possesses everything that is, everything that was, and everything that ever will be.

And yet, Jesus chose to set all that wealth aside. He chose to become a human being, to share all of our weaknesses and limitations, if not our sinful nature. And even though all human beings are immeasurably impoverished when compared to Jesus, He chose to be born into a family that was poor even by our standards – Mary, after all, had to give birth to Him in a barn. And things didn't get much better for Jesus after He grew up. He spent His entire earthly ministry wandering around, having no home of His own, depending on the contributions of believers.

But that wasn't the end of His giving, was it? For Jesus didn't just give up all the joys and comforts of Heaven. He also gave up what little comfort this world had given Him. He allowed Himself to be mocked and beaten. He let people spit in His face and nail Him to a cross. He gave up life itself.

And why did Jesus do all this? Why did Jesus impoverish Himself, giving up everything He was and everything He had? Verse 9 says that He did all this for our sakes, so that we might become rich. Jesus died so that we might be forgiven of our sins and have eternal life in the presence of the Father. And Jesus rose from the dead so that we might have assurance of new

life in the world to come and so that, through His sovereign power and majesty, we might have abundant life in this world. For what greater gifts could we possibly ask?

No, instead of ordering the Corinthians to give to the poor, and instead of making them feel guilty about their relative wealth, Paul simply pointed them toward the example of the Macedonian churches and toward the example of Christ, examples of radical, selfless generosity motivated by love for the needy. We all could do worse than to follow such examples, couldn't we?

But how can we really be like them? How can we become such selfless givers? Well, look back at what Paul said in verse 1. The Macedonians gave because of the grace of God which allowed them to give. Likewise, in verse 5, they gave so generously because it was the will of God. In other words, it was God Who gave them the gift of giving in such a generous way.

Now, God had given the Corinthian church great gifts as well. Verse 7 says that they had been given great faith – they had placed their trust in Christ as their Lord and Savior. They had been given the gifts of utterance and knowledge, which we might understand as a firm grasp on the Word of Christ, the Christian truth.

These are exactly the sorts of gifts that so many Presbyterians have. Our Reformed heritage puts faith front and center in the Christian life, affirming that we can only be saved by God's grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. We also look to the Word of Christ alone for truth, and we therefore put a great deal of emphasis on knowing and speaking the truth, from our pulpits as well as in the classrooms of the many educational institutions we founded and still help to support.

But the Corinthians possessed other gifts as well. They had the gift of diligence, an eager enthusiasm for the things of God. And, even though their relationship with Paul had been strained at times, Paul recognizes that they still had a great amount of love for him, and that this too is a gift from God.

But there's one more gift that Paul desired his Corinthian congregation to have, a gift that we Presbyterians should desire as well. Along with their faith and knowledge, along with their enthusiasm and love, Paul wanted God to give the Corinthians the gift, the grace of giving generously. And if we would follow the example of the Macedonian church and the example of Christ Himself, that's the sort of prayer we Presbyterians should pray, that God would make us as generous as we are knowledgeable, that He would give us as great a desire to give of our substance as we do of our learning. We should ask God to make us as enthusiastic in giving as

we are in service, to make us as eager to give to the needy as we are to love our own church leaders.

But there was one more thing Paul did to encourage the gift of giving in his readers – he sent Titus to them. Now, Titus didn't just go to the Corinthian church to urge them to fulfill their pledged contribution. He had lots of other business to do among them as well. But Paul recognized that sometimes people need a little encouragement if they are going to exercise their spiritual gifts, and the gift of giving is no exception. Sometimes the spiritual leaders of the church are called to give us a little nudge, a little check-up on our practice of giving. That seems to be part of Titus' mission as he travelled to Corinth.

Perhaps we need the same sort of check-up. So, how are we doing with our own giving? Do we really consider ourselves as belonging to the Lord? Do we look eagerly for opportunities to help those in need? Do we give an amount that is appropriate to how much we have – and do we try to go beyond that, stretching our budgets to the point of giving sacrificially? Do we give of our time, our talents and our treasure the way that Jesus did, holding nothing back, totally devoted to the glory of God and the good of others?

And if we aren't satisfied with our progress in this spiritual grace, let's pray that God would give us a heart more like the Macedonians had, that God would give us a heart like Jesus has, that God would us give us the gift of giving.