

Not Yours, but You
II Corinthians 12:11-21

Around here, lots of congregations make a big deal out of the anniversary of when their pastor began his ministry among them. They throw a party for him and escort him in and give him the seat of honor. Congregation members say all sorts of nice things about him, and they shower him with gifts. And of course there's always food, and lots of it.

Now, I know that's not the way Presbyterians do things. But I can say from personal experience that this congregation is not at all hesitant to express its appreciation in equally concrete, if perhaps less dramatic ways. This tablet computer I'm using and this robe I'm wearing are just a couple of examples. To say that this congregation is generous would be quite an understatement.

So, how would y'all feel if I were to say the same sort of thing Paul said to the Corinthians? What if I were to say, "Thanks, but no thanks," when y'all tried to express your appreciation financially? For according to verse 13, that's exactly what he did. He told them he didn't want their stuff, preferring instead to keep working at his trade of making tents, and even relying on contributions from other, frankly poorer congregations to get by.

So, what was Paul's problem? Was he just trying to be rude? No, he was actually giving the Corinthians a glimpse into his true priorities. He was trying to help them understand what would really be a blessing to him. For the bottom line is that, in spite of their wealth and their willingness to give him all sorts of material things, he just wasn't that interested in money.

And the same thing is true for most preachers today. Now, I know we've all heard about the way Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker milked their ministry for personal profit, and we are rightly skeptical of all those TV preachers with their expensive suits and private jets trying to wring just a few more dollars out of their viewers. But for most pastors, it's not about the money. For let's face it: if you're interested in how much you can make and you're good with language you go to law school, not seminary. If you want to prosper because of your good people skills and persuasive speaking abilities, you go into sales, not into the ministry. No, preaching has never been a wise choice for someone who wants to make a fortune.

And that means that when congregations want to bless their pastor by giving him material things, well, they're nice, and they are certainly appreciated, but they're not really what most pastors are focused on. It'd be like giving an avid golfer a tennis racket for Christmas.

So, what did Paul really want? If the Corinthians really wanted to bless their pastor, what should they have given him? He gives us part of the answer in verse 14 – "I seek not yours, but you." In other words, Paul's real desire was not to have more of the Corinthians' things, but to have a closer relationship with the Corinthians themselves.

And to illustrate this, Paul points to the example of parents and children. The normal course of things, he reminds us, is for parents to work and save so they can support their children, so their children will have a better life than they themselves had. In fact, part of the joy of being a parent or grandparent is to be able to buy nice things or do nice things for your children and grandchildren, right?

So, because pastors play a somewhat parental role in their congregations, that's what would have given Paul the greatest joy – not to receive things from his spiritual children, but to be able to give them things. As he says in verse 15, what would have made him glad was to be able to spend his time and energy on blessing them, on demonstrating his love for them.

And I'm guessing that's still true for most pastors – I know it's true for me. And that means one of the best things any of y'all can do for me is what you're doing right now – just coming to worship is a great way to encourage and bless any pastor. For it's tough to take the time and effort to prepare a sermon only to preach it to a bunch of empty pews. It's tough to develop a lesson plan when so few want to come to Bible study. So don't let the treasurer hear this, but the fact is that it's a whole lot more important to me for y'all just to be here than it is for you to put something in the offering plate.

And that's not because I'm on an ego trip. No, the reason most of us pastors are most blessed when our congregations allow us to bless them is because of what Paul says in verse 19 – our main goal is to edify you, to build up the people of God. Like a cook is gratified when people sit down to eat, a pastor is most blessed when his people are learning the Scriptures. And we know that the best way to do that is to give you a steady diet of God's Word, and to help you understand it more clearly.

Paul certainly tried to teach God's Word to the Corinthians, didn't he? After all, when he founded the church, he spent at least 18 months there – that was a very long time for such a notoriously footloose evangelist. And after he moved on, he continued to write back to them, trying to make sure they understood the gospel properly. Two of those letters have been preserved in the New Testament, and this, of course is one of them.

But as we've learned from studying this letter, Paul didn't just want the people in Corinth to understand God's Word with their minds – he wanted them to live it out in their lives. Because he loved them so much he wanted them, as verse 21 says, to repent, to turn away from all of their selfish focus on personal pleasure, and live according to God's perfect law of love.

And that's still the whole point of preaching today. For this isn't supposed to be a mere academic exercise, an attempt to transmit information, or even to correct misconceptions. No, preaching is not just the explanation but the application of God's Word to all of our lives.

And that means that whenever we encounter the Word of God, it isn't just supposed to change our minds, but to change our hearts. After all, as the writer to the Hebrews said in our responsive reading, the Word of God is living and powerful – it's a discerner of all our thoughts and intentions. That means when we come to grips with what the Bible says, we should be changed, we should be challenged to move away from our sin and toward God, to move away from ourselves and toward other people in everything we say and think and feel and do.

And so, while it is indeed a great blessing to your pastor when you show up to worship and Bible Study, an even greater blessing would be for you to let the Word of God that you are hearing work in you, rearranging your priorities, modifying your motivations, and altering every aspect of the way you live. The best way for you to show love to your pastor is not just for you to learn about Jesus, but to follow Christ more consistently, to let the light of Christ shine through you, to demonstrate the life of Christ to everyone each and every day.

Unfortunately, it doesn't seem that the Corinthians were willing to bless Paul in this way. In fact, verse 21 says that their refusal to repent was the thing that humbled Paul the most, which means the thing that he found most humiliating. He was truly embarrassed that the people into whom he had poured such a big part of his life and ministry, the people he had spent so much time trying to build up were nevertheless so resistant to Christ's call to holiness.

And to make matters worse, it seems that when Paul had written letters trying to point out their sin to them, the Corinthians had not taken it well. That's why Paul says in verse 20 that, when he came to see them, he expected to find not repentant obedience, but debates and wrath and strife. Simply put, Paul feared that, after he had confronted them about their sin, any visit from him would blow up in a whirlwind of accusations and hurt feelings.

So, sure, the Corinthians were generous to their pastor with their material gifts. But at the same time they refused to really listen to him, at least on some subjects, because they didn't want the Word of God that he taught them to change their lives in those particular areas. So that's why, as verse 15 says, Paul came to the conclusion that they really didn't love him. Instead, they were keeping him at arm's length, trying to buy him off with material things, things that weren't really that important to him in the first place.

So, how about us Presbyterians? Now, our confessional standards affirm that the Scripture is inspired by God and is our rule of faith and life. And we believe that, at least intellectually. That's why we insist that our pastors go to seminary and learn about the Bible and the Westminster Standards, and even know some Greek and Hebrew. Moreover, we spend hours in committee meetings and Presbytery meetings examining all our Teaching Elders to make sure that they love God and that they know His Word, or as Paul puts it in verse 19, to make sure that they speak before God in Christ. And on top of that, y'all spend a big percentage of this congregation's budget to make sure this particular teaching elder has a nice place to live and, all appearances to the contrary, plenty to eat.

So, doesn't it make sense to get the greatest benefit you can from your Teaching Elder's teaching? Why not make weekly worship your top priority? Why not clamor for more opportunities to learn the Bible during the rest of the week? Why not seek Biblically-informed advice about your personal problems before they come to a head and become even harder to solve? Why not ask for a loving, honest, opinion about questionable habits before they have a chance to become besetting sins?

As Paul has so clearly shown us, that's really the best way to show your love to your pastor: not dinners and gifts and paychecks, but listening to the Word of God and learning it and living it out. The best way to love any pastor is just to let him do his job, to build you up in the knowledge of the Word and in the practice of righteousness. The best thing you can do for your pastor is to give not more of your things to him but more of yourselves to God.