

The Grace of Giving

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[0 : 0 0] ... famine and drought and also some persecution from the Jewish community there. It seems that over the year after writing 1 Corinthians that the initial enthusiasm of the Corinthians to give money to this cause had waned.

They'd started off eagerly but it seems a year later they hadn't done much about what they said they would do. Paul now a year later writes to Corinthians.

He himself is in North Greece in Macedonia and he writes to them and in the passage that we had read from us he says that it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something now finish doing it so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means.

That is, he's saying, last year you pledged that you would give. Now do it. Put your money where your mouth is so to speak. Fulfill what you promised a year ago to do.

He goes on in the rest of the chapter after today's reading and into chapter 9 to tell them to be ready because Titus and then himself would come and take up their collection and take it back to Jerusalem and he didn't want to be disappointed by them not having that collection ready.

[1 : 2 7] Paul writes this part of the letter to motivate them to give generously and he uses the example of the churches of Macedonia in North Greece, the churches in Philippi and Thessalonica and Berea and maybe some other places as well.

He uses their example to stir up the Corinthians to give generously. Indeed more than that. The churches of Macedonia were poor.

It was a colonial area. They were already suffering some sort of persecution and deprivation and so he uses the generous example of a poor church to shame the wealthy Corinthians.

Corinth was, relatively speaking, a wealthy city and its Christians were wealthy, including we know the city treasurer and so on. He is shaming the wealthy by the example of the poor.

That's not a bad thing. It seems to me that one of the benefits of reading the story of the church or biographies of Christians in the third world today ought to shame us in our own Christian lives and giving in generosity.

[2 : 4 3] As we see examples of people in Africa or Latin America or Asia who give extraordinarily generously, far beyond their means, in a poor society, that ought to shame us in our own Christian giving and response.

There are four things in particular about the example of the Macedonian church that Paul draws to the attention of the Corinthians. If poor Macedonia can give so generously, then so too ought you, wealthy Corinth, and so too ought we, 20th century affluent Australians.

This is not emotional blackmail. I think the church in Corinth deserved to be shamed by pledging things that they hadn't brought to fruition and maybe it should have the same effect on us as well.

Well, the first example is of sacrificial giving. Paul says about the churches of Macedonia in verses 2 and 3, for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.

For as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means and even beyond their means. Despite their poverty, despite even their extreme poverty and under severe affliction, the Macedonian church gave sacrificially, not just generously, but beyond their means, sacrificially.

[4 : 2 2] For them, poverty was no excuse for a lack of generosity. They didn't respond to Paul by saying, we're too poor to give. They gave and gave sacrificially.

And often that's the experience of charity workers today, people who shake tins on the street corners or outside shopping centres. It's often the people who look the poorest who give the most.

That ought to be a warning to us who are wealthy, that sometimes wealth has a fairly crippling effect on our generosity. We must make sure that doesn't happen to us.

There was a cow and a pig and they were boasting to each other about their generosity. And the cow said to the pig, look up here at all these shelves of milk.

Look how generous I've been. Look at all that I've given. And the pig, in response, pointed to the bacon and said, your giving is a contribution.

[5 : 34] Mine is a sacrifice. That is how Christian giving ought to be. Not just a contribution out of our surplus, something that we can easily replace that doesn't really cost us, but rather giving that is sacrificial, that may hurt.

We give up in order to give generously and sacrificially. That's why I guess we encourage people to use regular giving envelopes so that we can plan to give.

Because sacrificial giving rarely comes spontaneously. But when we plan to give sacrificially, budgeting so that we can give more than we thought we could give.

Alf Stanway, who was a famous Australian missionary bishop in Africa, used to say, think of the most that you could give and double it. That's sacrificial giving.

And that's how Christian giving is assessed. Not by the quantity, but by the sacrifice that is made. So that's the first part of the example that St Paul commends of the Macedonians and to the Corinthians.

[6 : 45] Sacrificial giving. The second part is enthusiastic giving. He says in verse 3 that, I can testify that they voluntarily gave according to their means and even beyond their means.

He didn't charge them to it or command them to do so. They voluntarily gave. But even more than that, he says in verse 4 that the Macedonian Christians begged us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints.

They were begging him to be allowed to give. That puts us to shame, surely. I wonder if we went through a service and forgot to take up the collection, how many people would walk out of church begging me to stop and put a collection round before we all went home.

I doubt that many would, but maybe I'm wrong. It seems that Paul wasn't going to ask these Macedonian Christians to give because they were poor.

But they begged him for the opportunity to give. They didn't want to be overlooked in this worldwide collection for the poor Christians in Jerusalem.

[7 : 54] They wanted to be part of it. They were enthusiastic in their giving. Indeed, joyful in their giving. In verse 2 he says that it is their joy coupled with their extreme poverty that has led to their generosity in giving.

They weren't reluctant and as Paul in the next chapter commends the cheerful giver, so were the Macedonians the example of that. People who are joyful, cheerful and enthusiastic in giving.

I wonder whether the collection is the high point of the service for you on a Sunday morning. That's one reason why I guess we sing hymns when we take up the collection because it's a way of expressing our joy as we give.

It's a remarkable combination, isn't it, that their joy plus their poverty equaled generosity. It's not the sort of equation that we'd naturally make. But poverty and joy equals generosity for the Macedonian Christians.

So that's the second part of the example that Paul commends. Sacrificial giving, enthusiastic giving and thirdly, spiritual giving. Verse 5, they gave themselves first to the Lord and by the will of God to us.

[9 : 16] That is, their giving is part of a bigger thing. They're not just giving money, they're giving themselves and they're not just giving to a Jerusalem church that they probably know little about, but they're actually giving to the Lord.

That's spiritual giving. They're not giving to appease their guilt. They're not giving because they feel a bit embarrassed when somebody shakes a tin in their face. They're not giving in order to feel righteous.

They're giving in response to the Lord, to a relationship that they have with the living God. Their generosity derives from their knowledge of God. When this issue of giving came up, they probably didn't form a finance committee.

They probably didn't respond with the caution of an accountant, but rather they gave with an irrational extravagance of a lover because it's their love for God and his for them that prompts the

generosity.

Love is undergirding this, their love for the Lord. And so this irrational extravagance that any lover has for their loved one is part of their generosity in giving for the sake of the Jerusalem Christians. [10:34] You see, Christian giving is not an act of charity, it's an act of worship. It's a spiritual activity. It rightly occurs in the middle of a church service as an act of worship.

It's not incongruous here. So that's the third thing. Sacrificial, enthusiastic, spiritual giving. And the fourth is partnership in giving. Later on in this passage, Paul says in verse 13, I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it's a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need so that, and presumably in the future sometime, their abundance may be for your need in order that there may be a fair balance.

Christian giving expresses unity and partnership with other Christian people in the world. The Macedonian Christians were eager to help.

Christians they probably never met in Jerusalem because of their partnership together as the people of God in the world. Their love for the Lord spills over into a love for the Lord's people.

[11:49] Paul is not commending here a sort of socialism where he takes away from compulsively or compulsorily from the rich in order to give to the poor so that everyone's got the same amount of money.

But rather that willingly, voluntarily, enthusiastically, those who have an abundance will give so that there are those who are no longer in need. Undergirding this is the idea that God has provided enough in this world for all.

It may be that we need to do a bit of redistribution, but there is enough for all to go around. These Christians recognise their unity in Christ and their love for the Lord's people meant they gave generously for those of the Lord's people in greater need than they.

That's why as part of our church program each year at Christmas, we have a special appeal through Tear Fund to give to Christians in the last couple of years in the Sudan who are far worse off than we are, facing extreme poverty and deprivation.

We give to them in partnership with them as gospel fellows in Christ together. We give especially at the time of year when we seem to spend so much money on ourselves and on our family who after all are fairly wealthy as well on the whole.

[13:14] Now we should say at this point that the example of giving here in this chapter is one of three types in the New Testament.

This is giving to the poor, to people who are not so well off. But there are two other types of giving as well. Firstly, there is the giving to support Christian ministry at home, one's home congregation and church, to set aside ministry in various forms of teaching and preaching and other sorts of ministry at home and that's commended in other parts of the New Testament, Galatians, 1 Corinthians 9 and so on.

So it's important for us to be paying for home ministry, to support the work of Holy Trinity as a place to which we belong. Secondly, the other type of giving, the third type of giving, is giving to missionaries to support Christian ministry elsewhere.

Whether in our own country or overseas, there's no distinction really in the end. But giving for the benefit of other people who may not now be Christians but need to become Christians.

Paul commends that sort of giving. Indeed, the Philippian church, we know to be so poor, supported Paul when he had gone on from Philippi to other places in Greece to minister.

[14:35] And that's why we as a parish spend money supporting missionaries in Nigeria and Pakistan, Nepal and outback South Australia among other places. The principles of giving that are in this chapter apply for each of those three categories.

Whether it's giving for ministry at home, mission work abroad, or the support of Christians who are poor, giving must be sacrificial, enthusiastic, spiritual and in partnership in the gospel.

And giving as part of our church and our church budget fits all of those categories in that our church budget applies for ministry here, mission abroad and care of Christians who are worse off than we are.

Well, that's the description of the example of the Macedonian churches that Paul commends to the Corinthians. By comparison, the Corinthians were wealthy, the Macedonians poor.

But the Macedonians gave generously and that is what Paul is seeking to spur and prod the Corinthians to do. The Corinthian church's wealth was not just a wealth of money.

[15 : 56] They boasted about their spiritual wealth. And in 1 Corinthians we see time and again instances of their boasting that they are, to quote Paul in 1 Corinthians 4, kings or lords.

They've got everything they need. They've got every spiritual gift and spiritual blessing that they need. They seem to boast about such spiritual wealth. But Paul fears there is one gift they lack, the gift of giving or the grace of giving.

He says in verse 7 of this chapter, 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 grace, literally, the grace of giving.

Paul is hinting here that these Christians who boasted about their spiritual wealth lacked an essential gift, the gift of giving and giving generously.

And he goes on in verse 8 to say, I do not say this as a command but I'm testing the genuineness of your love. You see what generous giving is associated with?

[17 : 14] Love. And if you know 1 Corinthians, you know the one thing that that church lacked. Love. We all know that well-known poem about love in 1 Corinthians 13.

Love is patient and kind and so on. It's not just a beautiful poem. Paul was chiding the Corinthians for their lack of love. They boasted that they had everything but they lacked love and that is seen in their lack of generous giving.

Paul links the two together and it's interesting that in the letter to the Philippians, the church that is so generous in Macedonia, they are full of love. He commends them for their love in the letter to the Philippians.

Well, how does this fit us? give us a gift in our spiritual repertoire? How sacrificial is your giving? What does it cost you to give? What do you give up in order to give more? Do you give beyond your means, according to your means, or according to your meanness?

[18 : 29] gifts? How enthusiastic is your giving? Does giving fill you with great joy and love for the Lord and the Lord's people?

Or do you give reluctantly, hesitantly, resentfully? how spiritual is your giving? Does your giving reflect your love for the Lord and the Lord's people?

Does your giving flow out of a gratitude to God for all his blessings to you and the relationship that he's established with you? Do you see your giving as partnership in the gospel with other Christian people?

So do you give regularly even when you're absent on holidays? Because you know that you're in partnership with the congregation here if you belong here. Whether you're here or not, the ministry keeps going and the partnership continues.

Because you give for the sake of others rather than for yourselves and what you receive. There is only one remedy for the lack of generous giving, for the lack of the grace or gift of giving.

[19 : 48] Embedded in these verses about giving comes the supreme example, Jesus himself.

Paul says in verse 9, for you know the generous act, the grace that is of our Lord Jesus Christ, Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.

There was none richer. All the eternal riches and glory were his before he became a man. man. But there was none poorer.

In life he had nowhere to lay his head, but especially in death, on the cross, impoverished.

Why did he do that? Why did he give up that wealth of heaven for the shame, indignity and poverty of life and death on earth?

To make us rich. Not so that our bank accounts go sky high, but so that we might be rich in righteousness, rich in heaven's glory and wealth forever.

[21 : 15] We've been redeemed at an incalculable cost, bought with precious blood, so that we might enjoy the riches of heavenly righteousness.

These eternal riches are more precious than our wallets can bear. the pearls of great price cannot be contained by our purses.

The treasure in heaven that is ours makes the gold on earth seem dull. Through his poverty we have been made rich.

Thou who was rich beyond all splendor, all for love's sake becomest poor. Throne's for a manger didst surrender. Sapphire paved courts for a stable floor.

Thou who was rich beyond all splendor, all for love's sake becamest poor. Thou who art God beyond all praising, all for love's sake becamest man.

[22 : 28] Stooping so low, but sinners raising heavenwards by thine eternal plan. Thou who art God beyond all praising, all for love's sake becamest man.

That's disproportionate giving. Far beyond what is deserved by us. That is grace amazing and love astonishing. But unless such grace has reached our hearts, we will not be generous givers in love of the Lord.

But if such grace has reached our hearts, then it compels us and constrains us to be generous givers. Not compelled by some law or legalism about how much we should give, but compelled by the cross to give sacrificially, enthusiastically, spiritually, in partnership with God's people for the sake of the gospel.

As another hymn writer said, were the whole realm of nature mine, that would be an offering far too small. Because this love is so amazing, so divine, that it demands my soul, my life, my all.

Next week, as we've said, is Thanksgiving Sunday here at Holy Trinity. An invitation to make a special offering of thanks to God. And there are an abundance of things for which we can give thanks.

[24 : 06] And no offering we can make will repay him the blessings that are ours in Christ already. Not only the blessings of health and job, but the blessings of Christian faith and the guarantee of a sure and certain inheritance in heaven and so on.

So let us make sure that our gifts to God, not only next Sunday but weekly, are sacrificial, enthusiastic, spiritual, in partnership in the gospel.

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for our sakes he became poor. so that through his poverty we might become rich.

Amen. Amen.