

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Ministry in Giving - 2 Corinthians 8 and 9

This morning we shall be moving onto chapters 8 and 9 of our study of 2 Corinthians that concern the ministry of giving. To help us to grasp the contents of the two chapters we shall consider them in sections. From 8:1-6 the Apostle cites the liberality of the Macedonian churches, an example, as we see from verses 7 to 15, that will act as a spur to similar action from the Corinthians, or so Paul trusts. The rest of chapter 8 offers support for the delegates to Corinth, in the form of a letter of commendation, with a further expansion of this visit in 9:1-5. The concluding verses of this chapter show how generosity enriches the giver.

We shall now return to the main issue of chapter 8, the gift to the Jerusalem church that Paul had brought to the attention of the Christians at Corinth in a previous letter. We can read about this in 1 Corinthians 16:1-4: "Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given orders to the churches of Galatia, so you must do also: On the first day of the week let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper, that there be no collections when I come. And when I come, whomever you approve by your letters I will send to bear your gift to Jerusalem. But if it is fitting that I go also, they will go with me."

By the way this topic is introduced it is more than probable that they had previously been told about the many poverty-stricken Jerusalem Christians and how efforts were being made to relieve them. In the meantime, however, the collection at Corinth had been neglected so Paul, in the chapters we are considering, gently brings the subject to the attention of the church there.

Christian giving can be a contentious issue yet we have before us, in chapters 8 and 9, a pattern for giving that is not exceeded anywhere else in the New Testament. Living in a materialistic world, as we do, where money seems to be the sole criterion of measurement of success, it is easy to adopt the standards of our society and selfishly spend all our resources upon ourselves, without sparing a thought for the needs of others. While I am writing these words, there is machine in the street outside of my window, ripping up the tarmac from the road. There is no machine that tears into our conceptions and ingrained habits. Only the example of the Lord Jesus and His love, along with the power of the Holy Spirit, can effect an alteration of our selfish attitudes. We shall spend the next few minutes studying how Paul encouraged the Christians at Corinth to give generously.

In 8:1-5 we read of the example of the churches of Macedonia: "Moreover, brethren, we make known to you the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia: that in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded in the riches of their liberality. For I bear witness that according to their ability, yes, and beyond their ability, they were freely willing, imploring us with much urgency that we would receive the gift and the fellowship of the ministering to the saints. And not only as we had hoped, but they first gave themselves to the Lord, and then to us by the will of God."

When Paul wrote these words he was quite probably in Macedonia ministering and overseeing the churches there. He had had to leave them five years or so previously because of unsafe conditions in that province. It would seem that now it was much safer, even if poverty was rampant there. The level of their giving from such desperate circumstances almost embarrassed Paul. It certainly reaches down the ages to bring an accusation to us today, for we never equate affliction and poverty with abundance of joy. The Christians in Macedonia knew something of the secret of the living God, as revealed by the Lord Jesus, for their experience of Him changed the values and direction of their lives.

The giving of the Macedonians was not a consequence of a dragnet of vigorous and strident appeals. Rather was it a consequence of their love for the Lord and an appreciation of His great goodness and love. There is also a further reason in verse 4, where it states that they considered it a mark of the fellowship, which they enjoyed with all the believers. Christians should not be independent of one another, yet we often appear to be. In verse 7, Paul also appeals to their evident progress in spiritual matters as an incentive for giving: "But as you abound in everything, in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all diligence, and in your love for us, see that you abound in this grace also."

May we also see that the Christian faith involves more than just singing hymns, whether accompanied by an organ, or a guitar.

Paul had a deeper motive than the relief of Christians in Jerusalem when he appealed to the Gentile churches to remember the poor. Always conscious of the enmity that his mission to the wider world raised in the hearts of some in Judea, he attempted to allay these suspicions by emphasising that the middle wall of partition between Jew and Gentile had been broken down. In Romans 15:31, he asked for prayer that his service for Jerusalem might be acceptable to the saints. He ever wanted visible unity and open fellowship between Jewish and Gentile believers.

We must move on now to the hoped for response from the Corinthians. We can read about this in verses 6 to 15, though I shall only read verses 8 and 9 at this point: "I speak not by commandment, but I am testing the sincerity of your love by the diligence of others. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich".

Here, one might suggest, we have a glorious summary of the New Testament message in this most succinct verse. In the space of about thirty words, the apostle outlines the person and work of the Lord Jesus.

As we have seen, Paul has encouraged the Corinthians to give by referring to the Macedonians, and to their own aim of spiritual progress, so now he brings to their attention the supreme example of the Lord Jesus. The wonder of the incarnation is encircled in the words "He became poor", and the reason why this happened is in the phrase "For your sakes". The Corinthians could not help but be moved to contribute from their wealth as they were reminded of the Lord's great stoop from the heights of glory to an earthly pathway that could only lead to the cross. The loving kindness that brought about the enriching of all Christians, including here the Corinthians, must touch our hearts, as it must have touched theirs. If you only remember verse 9 of our passage this morning, you will be able to recall the very precious truth of One who came from a scene of glory and bliss in order that we should be enabled to share in the wonders of that eternal scene, where He is now. How remarkable that such a gem of a verse should arise out of a discussion of the financial responsibility of the Corinthian Christians.

Paul, in verse 10, informs us that the church at Corinth had grasped the concept of the Jerusalem collection and participated in it over a year before. It was not a rebuke that nothing had yet been sent, but a commendation that they were active in these matters before the Macedonians. That they had not exceeded them is obvious from the context, yet Paul is ever generous in recognising something of merit in their spiritual progress. When there was need, Paul could deal severely with the Christians of the churches he visited. Usually, however, it was the carrot of praise and encouragement that he used.

Verses 11 and 12 furnish us with a few principles to govern our giving: "... but now you also must complete the doing of it; that as there was a readiness to desire it, so there also may be a completion out of what you have. For if there is first a willing mind, it is accepted according to what one has, and not according to what he does not have."

It seems simple common sense that we give from what we possess and not what we don't possess, yet how many times have you heard someone say that if they had a lot of money they would give to the homeless, the hungry, or a cause like cancer research. It is so easy to be of a mind to give it if we had more. For the Christian, the giving must come from what we have. Secondly, we cannot give money belonging to somebody else. By this I mean the suggestion that Sir Somebody should give because he is rich. That is their responsibility. The Christian's giving is between him and the Lord.

There are other thoughts, in verses 13 and 14 that have to do with gifts and the Jerusalem church. Giving, writes Paul, will not always and in every case be the responsibility of the Corinthians. The time may well come when they will be in a position of need. The fellowship of Christians will then be moved to assist them. Furthermore, in a spiritual sense, the Gentile Christians had been recipients of the outflow from Jerusalem, as Paul states in Romans 15:27.

We move on now to 8:16-24, the section that reads like a letter commending the three delegates who accompanied the letter to the church at Corinth. Titus, a Greek Christian, is the only one of these three who is named. Earnest care, diligence, and ability in the Gospel are just three of the sterling qualities that these travellers possessed. Paul gives credence to their presence in Corinth by outlining in verse 23 their standing: "If anyone inquires about Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker concerning you. Or if our brethren are inquired about, they are messengers of the churches, the glory of Christ."

Then, as now, those who deal with money can often arouse questions in suspicious people's minds. It needs a person of quality and integrity to be trusted with donated money. Paul made sure that not all of the delegates were of his choosing, as he tells us in verses 19 and 23 where the unknown brothers are categorically shown to be the choice of the churches. Administering the funds of a church or Christian fellowship requires every action to be transparent and open before God and man.

Paul sought to encourage the Corinthians to subscribe generously. In doing so, he sought to remove every barrier that they could raise as to why they shouldn't give.

This brings us neatly to chapter 9 where the opening verse reads as though a new subject is being broached. Most commentators, however, agree that it is the continuing topic of the Jerusalem collection that forms the basis of discussion in the first five verses. Paul is suggesting to the Corinthians that their preparations for this collection were a cause of his boasting to the Macedonians. If, as seemed likely, the original eagerness was not translated into hard currency there would be embarrassment, not least to Paul, as verses 4 and 5 state: "...lest if some Macedonians come with me and find you unprepared, we (not to mention you!) should be ashamed of this confident boasting. Therefore I thought it necessary to exhort the brethren to go to you ahead of time, and prepare your generous gift beforehand, which you had previously promised, that it might be ready as a matter of generosity and not as a grudging obligation."

In Paul's mind the image of a 'grudging obligation' was to be avoided at all costs. Amongst the following verses are some important principles that should control our giving: "But this I say: He who sows sparingly will reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver." So say 9:6-7. There are three details that I wish to comment on from these verses. The first is that giving is equated with sowing, which is reminiscent of the words of the Lord Jesus in Luke 6:38: "Give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom. For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you."

The Corinthian church was being urged to give as befits Christians. 9:6-7, that we have just read, with their imagery of a sowing seeds, also suggest the freedom that the sower has to scatter the seed, either in a miserly fashion or generously. Our love for the Lord and His people ought to be the index of our giving. Verse 7 also contains a phrase that should remind us of Daniel when he was in exile. In Daniel 1:8 we read that Daniel purposed in his heart not to defile himself with the king's meat. As Christians we ought to be men and women with purpose in our hearts and those purposes should line up with the will of God. Giving should not be a whimsical matter of any cause that takes our fancy, like a child dipping his hand in a lucky box.

The third detail that I want to extract from verses 6 and 7 is that once we have resolved on a course of action we should give cheerfully. The gift should not be rung from our grasp, either actually or metaphorically. If God loves a cheerful giver, our whole demeanour should reflect that. Often the measure of our giving is what others give and, sometimes, when we learn that others have not given to the level that we have, we moan. Not out loud, of course, yet loud enough for God to hear. We should give our gifts looking upwards, not around and about. When we meditate upon what the Lord has given to us we should be cheerful givers.

As verse 8 tells us, any progress we make in Christian living, and that includes such mundane matters as giving, is all of grace. Nothing of good and of lasting value that is achieved in us can be of the flesh. When I, with purpose of heart, become a cheerful giver the Spirit of God has been active in me. As Paul has written, "God is able to make all grace abound towards us". There is even a further point here, in verse 8, in that however much we give, God, in grace, makes up the deficiency, though not always in monetary terms.

Verses 10 and 11 are almost a prayer from Paul for the Corinthian saints. I quote from the New King James Version: "Now may He who supplies seed to the sower, and bread for food, supply and multiply the seed you have sown and increase the fruits of your righteousness, while you are enriched in everything for all liberality, which causes thanksgiving through us to God."

Again we are reminded that it is the Lord who gives the increase. When large sums of money are spent in our world today, it is sometimes said that it is like dropping money into a bottomless pit. The Christian can never say this for, as we have just read, God can multiply the seed we have sown and increase the fruit of our righteousness. This latter word of 'righteousness' simply means our good works or, in this context, our gifts. When those in need have been helped, they will offer thanks to God and to those who gave. How true are those words quoted by Paul to the Ephesian elders, but originating from the Lord Himself, that it is more blessed to give than to receive.

We are now approaching the final verses of this morning's study, which has been concerned with the vital subject of the Christian's liberality. The previous verses have told us that giving enriches the givers along with relieving the needs of the recipients. The latter part of verse 12, and verses 13 and 14 now highlight further effects of Christian giving: "... but also is abounding through many thanksgivings to God, while, through the proof of this ministry, they glorify God for the obedience of your confession to the gospel of Christ, and for your liberal sharing with them and all men, and by their prayer for you, who long for you because of the exceeding grace of God in you."

How many good things flow from the right giving of a Christian! A simple, almost mundane, act can ripple outwards and upwards until a burst of praise swirls around the throne in heaven! We are people most blessed in that we have

the inestimable privilege of serving and praising God in the details of our daily life. Worship and praise are not always sedentary occupations. Let us see our giving as a measure of our love and devotion to the Lord.

In the verses we have just read, there are other consequences that flow from the generous giving of a believer that have not been commented on yet. One is that the believers in Jerusalem will be in prayer because grace has touched the hearts of the Corinthians. How good to see God at work in other parts of the church, especially as many in Jerusalem were initially suspicious of the Gentiles being included in the blessing that they considered their own entitlement. Secondly, these gifts emphasised the unity that exists between all Christians when such a phrase as 'they long for you' is written.

We have now reached our final verse: "Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!" To close I can do no better than to quote the words of a former Bible teacher. "All giving by the Christian flows from that which has been given to him from God. Hence the apostle cannot close his exhortation on this theme without leading our thoughts to God's supreme gift from which all our giving flows. It is so great a gift as to be beyond all our powers of expression or description. We can only utter our thanks for it. As we add our 'Amen' to the thanksgiving, let us see to it that we have such a lively sense of the greatness of the gift that we diligently practise the grace of giving ourselves."

May the Lord help us to do so this day and every day!

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