

2 Corinthians

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2 Corinthians Introduction

Paul wants to grow mature, obedient givers not extract one off gifts from emotional givers

In Galatians 2:1-10 Paul tells of a visit to Jerusalem at which he met Peter and the other 'pillar apostles'. In closing, Paul notes his warm agreement with their one request that he 'remember the poor' (Gal. 2:10). This, in all probability, is the origin of a financial offering to the impoverished church in Jerusalem that Paul undertook in the mid-50s AD. Strangely perhaps, in Acts 24:17 Luke makes only a passing reference to the offering but Paul mentions it again in 1 Corinthians 16:1-4 and Romans 15:22-28 and it is treated extensively in 2 Corinthians 8-9. The offering was immensely significant to his apostolic ministry and teaches much about the relationship between money and the gospel. One scholar has described Paul's collection as 'an illustrative model of his theology'.

For Paul, preaching the gospel of Jesus was everything, so why would a *financial* collection be so important to him?

The purpose of the Jerusalem offering

Paul Schervisch speaks of the *demand* and *supply* sides of fundraising. The demand side is familiar to us through street collection tins, TV adverts and events such as Comic Relief: the need we see or read about 'demands' our response. Good fundraising, says Schervisch, blends the demand with the 'supply side' of fundraising, the *motivation* of the donor to give, the passions that move the donor.

This distinction between supply and demand helps us to understand Paul's approach in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9. The financial basis of the Jerusalem church may have collapsed as a result of persecution, or possibly the economic strain of caring for the widows and orphans, or the experiment in sharing goods in common in Acts 2:43. Whatever the reason, the need in Jerusalem that demands a response was very real, although Paul never actually says what the need is.

Now this need never disappears from view but Paul's main emphasis in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 is upon the 'supply side' of the equation. Paul wants to grow mature, obedient givers, not extract one-off gifts from emotional givers moved by the plight of people far away. For Paul, the collection is more than a charitable act but a sign, even a sacrament, of mutuality between churches, between Jew and Gentile, between apostle and churches.

- The context in which Paul was urged to 'remember the poor' concerned the acceptance of gentile Christians without circumcision and defining areas of missionary responsibility. Caring for the poor through the collection can hardly be an unimportant or unspiritual matter.

the offering was about much more than money; it was about relationships in the church.

practising generosity was vital to the spiritual growth and maturity of the Corinthian church

- For Paul, the offering was a symbol of the unity of Jew and Gentile in Christ, an area in which Paul had experienced much tension. The offering was about much more than money: it was about relationships in the church.
- Underlying this is Paul's own understanding of the relationship of Jew and Gentile. In Romans 15:22ff he says that it is right for Jerusalem to be blessed by the financial gift because the *spiritual* wealth of the Jerusalem church has blessed the Gentiles. The collection underlined the Jewish roots from which the Christian church grew.
- Some Old Testament passages pictured the Gentiles bringing gifts to Jerusalem in the Messianic age. Paul may have understood this collection in that way and as a sign of the final conversion of Israel and the end of the ages.

Paul and the Corinthian church

Initial enthusiasm in Corinth for the Jerusalem offering had faded (2 Cor. 8:10-12). There were internal problems in the church around sexual morality, food offered to idols, spiritual gifts and the nature of the resurrection. In addition, a group of 'false apostles' questioned Paul's status as an apostle and money was at least one factor. In 2 Corinthians 12, Paul angrily defends himself against suggestions that he had taken financial advantage of anyone in Corinth. There is a key lesson about stewardship here: giving is always dependent upon the quality of relationships in a church. People do not just give, they give to something.

Paul and patronage

From 1 Corinthians 9:3-15 we know that Paul believed that it was right *in principle* for an evangelist or apostle to receive financial support, although Paul himself chose to make his own living as a tentmaker. But, on leaving a city, Paul he was happy to receive gifts to resource his preaching somewhere else (Phil. 4:15-18). Paul's practice contains an important lesson about the nature of giving. Those blessed spiritually by faith in Jesus should share the blessing with others and that included financial sharing. The Greek word for 'send' in 2 Corinthians 1:16 has the meaning of giving practical help.

But this principle by which Paul lived may have caused him problems in Corinth. In the culture of his day wealthy people would act as patrons to others, say an artist. They gave money and in return those receiving patronage would honour the patron in their words and their work. If honour was not given then the person who received the patronage was shamed. It may be that in refusing patronage and by working for a living Paul offended some key leaders in the Corinthian church. Whatever the situation money became an issue between Paul and the Corinthian church. So why not just let the money sensitive matter of the Jerusalem offering drop? The offering was important to Paul's apostolic ministry and he also knew that practising generosity was vital to the spiritual growth and maturity of the Corinthian church.

Paul never uses the word "money" but a range of deeply religious words, notably grace

to preach from 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 is not to preach about money in isolation but about discipleship and grace.

Paul had already written briefly about the Jerusalem offering to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 16:1-4). The Greek word Paul uses there to describe the collection (*logeia*) is a financial word meaning a voluntary payment. There is no sense of any compulsion and Paul's advice on the collection is practical and businesslike. In 2 Corinthians 8-9, Paul's tone could hardly be more different. He is affirming, sensitive and encouraging, well aware of the need to tread gently with his audience. And in the two chapters, Paul never uses the word 'money' at all. Instead he uses a range of deeply religious words, notably grace (*charis*), to describe the collection. He appeals to the grace of God demonstrated in the generosity of the poor among Macedonian churches and to the grace of Christ in his incarnation. He draws on the Old Testament story of the manna in the desert as a new economy where the greedy do not profit and the vulnerable do not go without. Finally, Paul promises a rich harvest of blessing from a generous sowing in giving.

The need of the Corinthian church to give to Jerusalem, to complete what they had started and to share the blessings they had received was every bit as important as the need of the Jerusalem church to receive their financial gifts. Giving is crucial to our own spiritual growth and maturity. It is for Christians the overflow of grace; more than just giving back, it is being caught up in the gracious giving of God himself. One of the blessings of giving is our own freedom and release. Philanthropist Henry Drucker puts it like this:

In this act [of giving] we disentrall ourselves by overcoming our slavery to possessions. We demonstrate that there are values in the world more important to us than our own selfish aggrandisement. True giving is an act of self-liberation. It becomes one of the major achievements of our life.

To preach from 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 is not to preach about money in isolation but about discipleship and grace.

Understanding 2 Corinthians

We know from Paul's own writing that he sent four letters to Corinth and some scholars have argued that 2 Corinthians is actually a compilation of Paul's letters. How else, they say, can we explain the change in tone and approach from the optimistic and affirming chapter 9 to the combative and defensive tone of chapters 10-13, which may be the 'tearful letter' of 2 Corinthians 7:8? Again, having written about the collection in chapter 8, why does Paul start over again in chapter 9? Perhaps chapters 8 and 9 are in fact two letters, the second written to a wider group of Christians in Achaia rather than in Corinth.

Certainty is not possible but the position taken here is that 2 Corinthians is a unity as it stands. There is no textual evidence for different letters, and the words Paul uses and the themes he addresses are found throughout the whole letter. In this his most personal letter and one intended to be read out loud to the churches,



Paul uses the public speaking techniques (called *rhetoric*) from the law courts and public speech to defend himself against opponents who would deny his apostolic credentials. The apparent mismatch of chapters 8 and 9 and the defensive tone of chapters 10–13 is, arguably, due not to a compilation of letters but to a sustained piece of rhetorical argument.

2 Cor 8:1-9

(NIV)

We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; 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, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints— and this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us, so that we might urge Titus that, as he had already made a beginning, so he should also complete this generous undertaking among you. 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 generous undertaking.

I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.

Suggested readings

Exodus 35:1-10, 20-22a ■ Matthew 26:6-13

Paul's opening phrase, 'We want you to know...' is used elsewhere in his letters to introduce a significant new subject. The subject is money and Paul starts precisely at the point where we in our day lose confidence! Our anxieties around preaching and teaching about money often turn on the perception that people are giving all they can, that there is little more to give. Paul by contrast tells the Corinthians about the sacrificial giving of the church in Macedonia. Amid poverty and persecution their gift is beyond what they can afford (*para dunamin*). Why does Paul do this? It surely makes him vulnerable to the kinds of disclaimer with which we are all too familiar: 'our situation is much worse than theirs'. We can suggest two answers.

First, here Paul uses a rhetorical device termed *syncretism*: a public speaker would stimulate healthy competition between people or cities by pointing to the achievements of the other. Many churches will know the power of a visiting speaker sharing stories to enlarge our sense of what is possible and break down the insular parochialism that can beset a parish. Likewise, fundraising professionals know the value of those first 'lead gifts' that kick-start a campaign and encourage others to give.

Paul is happy to use Macedonian generosity to challenge Corinth to finish what they started (2 Cor. 8:10-12) but appeals to them for a more profound reason. He does not talk about the money they gave but about the grace (*charis*) that was given to them and which made their sacrificial giving possible. Indeed, the financial weakness in Macedonia underlines their generous response as an act of grace.

In fact, *charis*, grace, is the keyword in this whole passage and appears five times in verses 1-9. This offering is not simply fundraising for money but an act of grace. In verse 7 he invites the Corinthians who were proud of their spiritual gifts to abound or excel in 'this [act of] grace' (*en tautē tē chariti perisseuēte*). All spiritual gifts are a gift of grace and, here, Paul, quite without embarrassment, puts an invitation to give financially alongside those charismatic, spiritual gifts of which the Corinthian church was so proud. Paul is not concerned simply to raise money but to change the way the Corinthians think about money.

Paul begins by pointing to God's grace among the Macedonians; he ends this section by pointing to the grace of Jesus, 'who though he was rich yet for your sakes became poor so that by his poverty

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you might become rich' (verse 9). The gracious giving to which the Corinthians are invited is a reflection, and indeed a part, of the gracious giving of God in Christ. The model for financial giving is the gracious self-giving of Jesus. If we have been saved by grace, then all we have is gift. In 1 Corinthians 4:7 Paul, puts it succinctly, 'What do you have that you have not been given?' Living generously is the overflow of grace.

In verse 4 the elaborate phrase 'begging us with many pleadings' (*meta pollēs paraklēseōs deomenoi hēmōn*) describes the Macedonians' request to take part in 'this service to the saints'. The use of *koinōina* in this verse is interesting. It can mean 'fellowship' but also means partnership with and participation in something. The Macedonians were not reluctant partners but churches wanting to be part of this act of grace, to participate in something that God was doing.

Here is a key truth about fundraising and stewardship. We often feel like beggars pleading for money, embarrassed for fear of upsetting people. But in truth the invitation to give is an invitation to share in a cause and to participate in the outpouring of grace in our lives and in the life of the local church. The gracious gift of the Macedonians, and our own giving, are a work of God's grace made concrete in our financial offering.

It is for this reason that Rowan Williams points out the limitations of the language of 'giving back to God' as a description of giving. It has a biblical basis in the well known prayer of David in 1 Chronicles 29 ('all things come from you and of your own do we give you') and is fine as far as it goes. But giving is more than simply giving something back to God, calculating what amount or even percentage is acceptable. Giving is being caught up in the flow of God's gracious giving, being caught up in grace. The sacrificial giving of the Macedonians is in the nature of sacrament; it speaks in outward form of an inner grace. Paul does not want the Corinthians to match the Macedonians euro for euro, but to let grace flow through them and to share in its generosity.

Accordingly, in verse 8, Paul is clear that he is not commanding the Corinthians to do anything. Had Paul tried to command a response, he would have trampled on the tender relationships between him and the Corinthians. More than that, however, it is in the very nature of the grace to which Paul appeals that he could not command such a response.

Paul's boldness in addressing the sensitive issue of money teaches us not to be hesitant in talking money in the church. But we also learn from this passage about *how* we talk about it. Budgets, appeals and techniques all have a legitimate place but are all to be understood in the richer context of grace. Financial giving is a participation in the grace of God, as is the giving of time and talents. The giving of the latter does not absolve me of responsibility for generous giving.

But for all the stress on grace, both the money and the need are

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important. Grace and participation in the gracious giving of God are the motivation to give but the need is the context of that giving. People do not and will not give into a vacuum. Paul speaks of grace but it is a grace modelled by the Macedonians' generosity to a cause in Jerusalem so well known that it needs no further explanation. In addition, later verses tell us that Paul had already sent three brothers ahead of him to prepare the collection and we must surely assume that part of their message was to speak movingly about the needs of the Jerusalem church.

Financial discipleship has two points of reference: the motivation of grace and a clear and compelling need that must be addressed. Interestingly, in Romans 12, Paul lists among the charismatic gifts 'meeting the need of others'. As noted above, Paul cannot command their response (2 Cor. 8) but he is clear that what they do in regard to the collection is a litmus test of the grace operative in them. What we do with our money, perhaps more than any other aspect of our lives, is a test of the depth of our discipleship and our experience of grace.

Stewardship reflections

The geographical map of Israel shows the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea joined by the Jordan River, which rises in the far north. Galilee is teeming with life, fed by the spring of the Jordan in the north and feeding the Jordan as it flows south. By contrast, the Dead Sea is just that – dead. Water flows in but stagnates; it has no outlet because it is below sea level. This is a picture of the dynamics of grace. What flows in must flow through us. If grace has no outlet, it stagnates and dies. We have received freely; to live we must freely give.

Amy Carmichael writes, 'We can give without loving, but we cannot love without giving'. The message of giving for Christians is not about a few drops more from unwilling congregations but an exploration of the riches of grace. God is the giver of all and in Christ Jesus we see his self-giving. The grace of God is a spring, a waterfall, an overflowing of abundant supply; when we give, we are caught up in the flow.

Leaders

To talk about money is not to request us to push a hard-pressed budget even harder, or to make a little more space for charity. To talk about money is an invitation to share in something God is already doing. When we give, we share God's grace. The challenge to our leaders is to see giving not simply as giving back something but being caught up in the giving of God. The challenge is not how much I give but how much of me is in my giving. For Jesus, the giving was of all that he was and all that he had to give, that we might become rich.

*giving is a litmus test
of faith*

Planned givers

Paul could not and would not command the Corinthians to do anything but he was clear about one thing. What we do or do not do with our money is a test of the reality of our faith, our commitment and our experience of grace. Giving is a litmus test of faith. It was Martin Luther who said that we need three conversions: of the heart when we know God loves us, of the mind as we learn to think as Christian people, and of the purse. He comments that, if faith has not touched our purse or wallets, then it is likely that it has not adequately penetrated either the heart or the mind.

Plate givers

Paul had fallen out with the Corinthians and they had patched up their friendship. Why does Paul risk disturbing the peace again by talking money? Because what we do with our money says a lot about our hearts. Jesus said it himself: 'where your heart is, then treasure is also'. As Billy Graham once said, a chequebook is a theological document; it tells what you believe in. A chequebook is a checklist of my priorities.

Today cheque books are rare indeed! For millions it is the banking app on our mobile phone that shows us what we believe and what our priorities are. But old school banking can still teach us a lesson or two. Every cheque in a cheque book is 'crossed' to ensure that the money goes where I want it to go. Does our chequebook (our banking app, our debit card, our Apple Pay enabled phone) need a different and deeper type of cross to remind generous disciples about making discipleship choices around money and reflecting God's priorities in my life?

2 Cor 8:10-15

(NIV)

And in this matter I am giving my advice: 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. For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have. I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. As it is written,

'The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little.'

The stewardship challenge is to help people connect the emotional response to need with nurturing obedient planned giving

Suggested readings

Exodus 16:9-21 ■ Matthew 6:25-34

In one sense, dividing the text at verse 10 is a little artificial. Paul's intention to offer advice here is paralleled by his verse 8 statement that he will not command the Corinthians. But verse 10 does mark a shift in Paul's thinking. Paul does here what stewardship in the church must do: connect that grace which is our motivation to give with the practical context in which our giving takes place.

Paul does not deny the good heart and the good start of the Corinthian church. The Greek behind the phrase 'you who began last year ...' (*hoitines*) has the feel of 'You were the kind of people who...'. But the task was not finished. Partly this is human nature. Our initial emotional response is not always translated into action, while emotional giving cannot be sustained without a decision to give in a regular, planned way. The stewardship challenge is to help people connect their emotional response to need with nurturing obedient planned giving. And the situation was made worse by deteriorating relationships as false apostles questioned Paul's apostolic credentials and his financial probity.

We touch here on two important points. The first is that giving is always very sensitive to the quality of relationships and pastoral care within the local church. Second, money can be actively withheld as well as given. What is received as grace and gift can be an expression of power or even patronage. Stewardship always has a context and is dependent upon a matrix of social relationships, pastoral care, decision-making and vision, or absence of vision, in the local church. We cannot ignore the local context.

For Paul, a willing heart and the completion of what was started are both essential. In verse 11 he brings together the elaborate expression, 'your eager willingness' (*hē prothymia tou thelein*, literally 'the readiness to be willing') with the verb 'complete' (*epiteleîn*) commonly used for the performance of a religious duty. Stewardship is an affair of the heart before it is an affair of the wallet. The ready willingness to give is what makes the gift acceptable (*euprodektos* – v12) for God is looking for people who know what they have received as the motivation for their giving. But giving is also about completion, the translation of willingness into action.

Paul also adds a qualifying thought; we give out of what we have (*ek tou exein*), not from what we do not have. Now Paul is making a significant theological point here, not providing excuses for those

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who say they have nothing to give! Giving is out of the gift we have received, not from what is left over when we have satisfied all our lifestyle choices to the best of our ability. His comments here complement Paul's earlier teaching (1 Cor. 16:2) as well as OT teaching (Deut. 16:10, 17; see also Tobit 4:8). The Greek philosopher Aristotle's comment is also interesting:

...liberality should be evaluated on the basis of one's capital. It is not determined by how much is given but on the basis of the donor's disposition, which gives in proportion to capital.

(*Eth. Nic.4.1.19*)

If our lifestyle is out of control, if our financial management is undisciplined or our giving is not one of our priorities, then there will be little left over from which we can give. Stewardship cannot be divorced from the lifestyle choices we make any more than from the economic circumstances in which we find ourselves. We note in passing here that Paul never offers the tithe as a standard of giving and we cannot assume its knowledge given his gentile audience. The principle here – arguably a tougher ask than a fixed amount – is a willing heart and a decision to give a proportion of income. The tithe is an outworking of that principle: too much for some, appropriate for many, too little for others.

In verse 13, Paul introduces the idea of 'fair shares' or 'a fair balance' (*isotēs*). It is on this biblical principle of mutuality and blessing that the system of parish share or common purse on which ministry of the Church of England are based is founded. On the one hand, Paul assures the Corinthians that no one is having an easy time at their expense. On the other hand, Paul makes it clear that any financial generosity from the Corinthians will be returned to them from Jerusalem (v14). The return is not money: there were other churches, not least the Macedonians, who needed such gifts more. In Romans 15:27, Paul is quite clear that he is talking about *spiritual* blessings.

Paul is teaching reciprocity at the heart of giving or, to put it less elegantly: when we give, we get something back. This is far from the self-centred calculation of a prosperity gospel but contains an important stewardship principle: giving releases spiritual blessings. This is true not only for the individual but also for the church. God's grace is generative of life and community; sharing in his grace is generative of new life both in us and through us in community. To be sure, this is not just about financial giving. However, so much of our personal security, happiness and identity are tied up with our money that discipleship and obedience in this difficult area of our lives can be fundamentally liberating.

To illustrate fair shares Paul alludes to the OT story of manna in the desert. Those greedy enough to attempt to collect too much cannot hold on to their surplus while those unable to collect all they needed do not go short. God is the giver of all that the Corinthian church has.

Stewardship asks much harder questions about how much we keep and how we spend it.

Stewardship is not about giving to the need but needing to give.

Paul challenges them to put fair shares into practice by sharing their surplus with Jerusalem and receiving the blessing in return. The abundance of God's provision makes possible a dynamic sharing of grace. Where material blessing is needed, it should be provided and a spiritual blessing will result. The spiritual blessing in return for giving is as much part of the economics of grace as is the obligation to extend to others the grace we have received (Matt. 18:21-35).

Stewardship reflections

Paul teaches in verses 1-9 that our motivation to give is the grace of God; the need to be addressed is the poverty of the church in Jerusalem. Between motivation and need are factors that can easily short-circuit the connection. Deteriorating pastoral relationships, lack of vision and loss of focus on the needs to be addressed all hinder effective stewardship. So too does ambiguity or a lack of realism as to the nature of the need. Paul was careful to link giving to what was possible, to proportional giving. We each need to be willing to ask, and leaders need to answer, the question, 'What do you want me to do?' We need to provide occasions and opportunities for people to give as well as nurturing the need and desire to give.

Leaders

All too often our giving is determined by the need of the church we support, sometimes accurately perceived, often not. This is appropriate but is only half the story. Stewardship is not about giving to the need but about our needing to give. Our need to give is greater than the need of the church to receive our gifts. Giving is an invitation to invest in God's economy of giving and receiving. Or, to change the imagery, being caught up in the flow of God's gracious giving. White-water rafting is an exciting experience. We can stay at the side of the river and paddle hard or can paddle into the flow of the water and be taken by its power and use our skill to navigate the river and enjoy the experience. There is a blessing in giving that we can find only when we leave the safety of the bank and get caught up in the flow.

Planned givers

Is our giving out of what we have been given or what we have left over? Is it proportional to our income or to what is left over at the end of the week or month? In truth, there will always be too much month left at the end of the money! The story is told of the man whose decision years ago to give a tithe, 10% of income now, seemed to be a lot of money given a significantly increased income. Seeking spiritual advice, he was disturbed to hear his vicar pray for a decreased salary so that he could continue to afford to tithe! Stewardship is a challenge not because it asks hard questions of how much we should give away but because it asks much harder questions about how much we keep and how we spend it. The seductive nature of money and possessions means that we will never

be entirely comfortable with those questions. However, it is the decision to give that breaks this cycle.

Plate givers

How much should I give? It is an important question but to answer it we might also need to ask, 'What stops me from giving?' For Paul, a breakdown in personal relationships hindered the completion of the collection. He needed to assure the Corinthians that they were not being taken for a ride by others. What hinders us from giving? Do we understand the needs of the church? Have we always assumed that the church is a rich organisation? Is there an ambiguity about how much we should give or are there clear guidelines for us? Are we exercising power by withholding our giving? Or have we simply never thought about it before?

2 Cor 8:16 - 9:5

(NIV)

But thanks be to God who put in the heart of Titus the same eagerness for you that I myself have. For he not only accepted our appeal, but since he is more eager than ever, he is going to you of his own accord. With him we are sending the brother who is famous among all the churches for his proclaiming of the good news; and not only that, but he has also been appointed by the churches to travel with us while we are administering this generous undertaking for the glory of the Lord himself and to show our goodwill. We intend that no one should blame us about this generous gift that we are administering, for we intend to do what is right not only in the Lord's sight but also in the sight of others. And with them we are sending our brother whom we have often tested and found eager in many matters, but who is now more eager than ever because of his great confidence in you. As for Titus, he is my partner and co-worker in your service; as for our brothers, they are messengers of the churches, the glory of Christ. Therefore, openly before the churches, show them the proof of your love and of our reason for boasting about you.

Now it is not necessary for me to write to you about the ministry to the saints, for I know your eagerness, which is the subject of my boasting about you to the people of Macedonia, saying that Achaia has been ready since last year; and your zeal has stirred up most of them. But I am sending the brothers in order that our boasting about you may not prove to have been empty in this case, so that you may be ready, as I said you would be; otherwise, if some Macedonians come with me and find that you are not ready, we would be humiliated—to say nothing of you—in this undertaking. So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to go on ahead to you, and arrange in advance for this bountiful gift that you have promised, so that it may be ready as a voluntary gift and not as an extortion.

Suggested readings

2 Chronicles 1:7-12 ■ Luke 12:13-21

In 8:1-9, Paul identifies grace as motivation for Christian giving. In 8:10-15 he links motivation to the practical, contextual outworking of the giving challenge and stresses mutuality and blessing in giving. Now Paul turns to address two important issues: accountability and advocacy. The first, when badly handled, can short-circuit the connection between the presenting need and the motivation to give; the second, when present, can significantly strengthen the connection. Stewardship is at one and the same time a most human and divine business.

Paul's concern for integrity in handling the collection is summed up in the lovely phrase 'the administration of this grace' in verse 19 (*en tē chariti tautē tē diakonoumenē*). What a rich summary of the ministry of a treasurer's and finance committees! Paul is careful to ensure that no one can criticise the way the collection is administered, so he appoints three men above reproach to manage the offering. Titus is a partner and co-worker of Paul (v23) who is close to the Corinthians (2 Cor. 7:6-7, 13-15). He has zeal (*spoudē*) for Corinth, the same word found in verse 8 about the Macedonians in making their contribution to the collection. Titus is going to Corinth 'of his own accord' and the single Greek word here, *authairetos* is used in verse 3 of the voluntary nature of the Macedonian gift.

The first unnamed brother (which some traditions identify as St Luke) has a reputation in the church and also a representative function, because appointed (*cheirotoneōtheis*) in verse 19 implies a show of hands, a formal method of appointment. Both the unnamed brothers are described as apostles of the churches and 'the glory of Christ'. Any idea that money is a secular, inappropriate concern for Christians is dismissed by how Paul speaks about the offering and the men he appoints to manage it.

Paul makes high claims for men accompanying a financial collection but the stakes are high. Financial probity, public accountability and transparency are required in verses 19-20 because, in managing the offering, these men are handling the things of God. Such financial probity is foundational of any Christian ministry. The Billy Graham organisation has stood the test of time because, in a culture of love offerings, TV evangelists and affluent lifestyles, Billy Graham drew a fixed salary, never accepted special offerings and the organisation publishes full accounts after each mission. In the local church, financial accountability and openness are always at a premium. Careful ongoing thought needs to be given to this matter.

Leaders should never distance themselves from either financial needs or their own commitment to give.

Paul stresses this godly accountability in verse 19, declaring that administration of the collection is to 'the glory of God himself' (*tēn autou tou Kuriou doxan*) – the use of himself (*autou*) adding special emphasis. Interestingly, Paul then adds the awkward phrase *kai prothumian hēmōn* – loosely translated as 'and our goodwill' in the NRSV. This is the same word used in verses 11 and 12 of the willingness or readiness to give. There is a parallel in 8:5, where Paul notes that the churches in Macedonia gave themselves to the will of God and then also to 'us', Paul and his companions. This collection is not just a whim of Paul but an apostolic act discerned as such by the churches.

So, while accountability matters, the three brothers also seem to serve as *advocates* of the collection. The brothers have passion for both the cause and for the Corinthians, the relationships to make this passion effective and the confidence of Paul himself. Paul will not plead the poverty in Jerusalem as an emotional means of releasing money from a reluctant Corinthian church. The brothers come to Corinth not as beggars pleading for money but as advocates of the apostolic and strategic importance of this offering: an offering from gentile churches to the Jewish mother church. We can, of course, only guess, but did the brothers speak with passion about the plight of Jerusalem, of the special place of Israel in the history of God's dealings with humankind, of Macedonian generosity and Paul's apostolic desire and urging for the Corinthians to be part of it?

The passage would suggest that clergy and the leadership of the church in particular need to be clearly and unambiguously identified with stewardship in the local church. It must be a personal commitment born out of their own discipleship. Leaders should never distance themselves from either financial needs or their own commitment to give.

Chapter 9 may represent the start of a new letter or simply a new train of thought for Paul. He uses the rhetorical device known as *paraleipsis*: he denies that he wants to talk about something and then does just that. The heart of verses 1–5 is verse 5. Paul wants the collection to be a gift, not something 'grudgingly given' or 'something wrung out of you'. Now these two phrases loosely translate Paul's word *pleonexia* in verse 5. Normally *pleonexia* means *greed* and is used this way in the manna story Paul has already quoted in chapter 8. So Paul may be contrasting generosity with a greedy love for money. However, in 2 Corinthians 12:17-18, *pleonexia* is used when Paul denies taking financial advantage of the Corinthians. So *pleonexia* used here in verse 5 may mean that Paul is contrasting a freely given gift with one that has been extorted from them, presumably by Paul himself. This would explain Paul's reluctance to order the Corinthians to do anything (8:8), his giving of advice only (8:10) and the double use of *authairetos* (8:3 and 8:23), which stresses the voluntary nature of the collection.

Whichever way we read verse 5, Paul wants the collection to be a gift. The Greek word here is *eulogeia*, literally 'a blessing' and

Generous giving is born from a heart touched by grace, but the midwife is planned giving.

*leaders must give **generously** before they ask others to give generously*

It is worth asking what honour and shame might mean in financial terms for today's church.

Paul may be making a play on words. In 1 Corinthians 16:2 Paul has used a common financial word for a collection, 'logeia'. But in 2 Corinthians 8-9, Paul deliberately avoids using any financial words at all to describe the collection and so uses *eulogeia*, which is used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament to describe gifts (Joshua 15:19; 2 Kings 15:15).

In our modern-day language, Paul is talking about a free-will offering. The only compulsion can be the imperative of grace itself, the need to give in order to be caught up in the flow of that grace. It is in the very nature of grace and of blessing that it cannot be compelled from outside. If by force of personality and apostolic authority Paul could have commanded a response, he would have obtained a gift but would not have grown and nurtured a generous giver.

How then does Paul ensure that the collection is truly a gift and not grudgingly given? Paul begins verse 5 by piling up verbs with the *pro*-suffix in verse 5: 'to go in advance' (*proelthōsin*), and 'prepare in advance' (*prokatartisōsin*) the gift 'which you pledged' (*proepēngelmenēn*). Generous giving is born from a heart touched by grace, but the midwife of generous giving is planned giving. Regular planned giving avoids the embarrassment and the grudging resentment of last-minute collections. Paradoxically, it is the discipline of planned giving that releases the joy and spontaneity of giving and which makes the difference between generous giving and a reluctant gift.

So we see that the three brothers are not sent by the archdeacon to collect arrears of parish share! Paul wishes to avoid a last-minute scabbling for funds because this is as corrosive of relationships as it is of generosity. At worst, financial problems promote resentment, mistrust and damaged relationships. And we should note carefully here the critical place for leaders in the modelling and promotion of stewardship within the congregation. Leaders must give generously before they ask others to give generously.

Finally, we note in passing the language of honour and shame drawn from the relationship of a patron and a client in Corinth. The willing participation of Corinth in the offering is to their honour; their failure to complete what they started is to their shame. It is worth asking what honour and shame might mean in financial terms for today's church. Is it not shame that churches in wealthy areas are less generous than poorer congregations? Is it not shame when churches that could meet all their financial needs and with money to spare are crippled because of low levels of giving?

Stewardship application

Stewardship must assume financial integrity but those charged with financial responsibility are administering grace, not watching the money. Stewardship is never about pleading but invitation; not fundraising but funding ministry. Those who administer grace must recognise that they are handling the things of God, supporting the

Is our giving realistic to sustain the ministry of church to which we belong?

ministry of the church and are themselves advocates, or otherwise, of that ministry.

Leaders

When we give we are participating in grace and handling the things of God. Would the way we plan our giving, the way we prioritise it and actually do it stand up to scrutiny? Is *where* we give a conscious and considered decision? Is *how* we give as businesslike and careful as the way we handle other financial priorities in our life? Is *what* we give an accurate reflection of what God has given to us? In short, does the way we handle our money give glory to God; does it bring honour or shame to us?

Planned givers

The grace of God always has an address, a place where it happens, people who are identified with it. So we must ask ourselves some hard questions. Is our giving realistic to sustain the ministry of the church to which we belong? When did we last review our giving? Does our giving keep track with our changed circumstances? Is it a priority on my expenditure? Is our gift planned in advance, free of reluctance, compulsion, greed? If we routinely give larger amounts elsewhere and plead this as a reason for not giving much to the church, are we bold to ask ourselves then why the local church is so far down the league table of our priorities? Why is it perceived as so undeserving?

Plate givers

This passage poses two challenges. The first is to be aware of the financial needs and situation of our church; if we do not know, then whom can we ask to find out? The second is the challenge to begin to plan for regular giving, through envelopes or by standing order. It is a commitment that blesses both the giver and the church that receives the gift.

2 Cor 9:6-15

(NIV)

The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. As it is written,

'He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures for ever.'

He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God. Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others, while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

Suggested readings

1 Kings 17:8-16 ■ Mark 4:1-20

In this section, the culmination of his teaching, Paul consciously urges generosity on the part of the Corinthians. It is a generosity to match the grace-filled giving of the Macedonian church, though actual comparison is no longer the issue. There is here no limiting of the gift to 'what you have' (8:12) or assurances of fair shares (8:13). Instead there is an appeal to generosity founded on a promise that God will abundantly supply their needs and so provide the ability to be generous. He has already hinted at this in 9:5, describing their gift as 'a generous gift' and he now explores it further. He makes three essential points: the sower, the seed and the harvest.

The Sower

In verse 6 Paul may be alluding to Proverbs 22:8 and 11:25 or may be simply quoting a contemporary and lost proverb and certainly the imagery of sowing would be familiar and obvious enough in its application to the Corinthians. One who sows sparingly will of necessity reap a sparse harvest. By contrast, sowing bountifully will produce a rich harvest. The Greek word here is *eulogeias*, meaning literally 'with blessings'. This is the same word Paul uses in verse 5 to describe the financial gift, while the use of the plural is intended to denote abundance. The decision to give and to give freely and gladly to the collection is akin to sowing a seed that will produce an abundant crop at harvest time.

The conclusion Paul draws is straightforward – we need to decide how much we shall give. The English translation 'decide' reflects, first, Paul's use of 'heart' (*kardia*), which in ancient thought is the seat of decision-making not of emotion. In addition Paul uses the verb *proērētai* (another *-pro* prefix verb; see the week three notes on 9:5), which emphasises the planned nature of this giving. Paul then asserts that this giving should neither be sorrowful or born of necessity but the actions of a cheerful giver. The Greek word for cheerful is *hilaron*, from which we get our word 'hilarious'. Now anyone who counts the collection at the average parish church will know that some people's giving is hilarious – but that is not quite what Paul had in mind! Nor is this the familiar parental instruction to a child, '...and do it with a smile on your face'. Two things need to be considered. The first is that the decision to give lies with the individual. Paul has consistently underlined that there is no compulsion beyond the obligation of grace itself. Second, as we explored in 9:1-5, the nature of planned giving makes possible a

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sustained and joyful response. It is last-minute scrabbling for funds that breeds resentment and joyless giving.

The way Paul uses this farming imagery is crucial. The emphasis is upon the heart of the sower, not the need to be met nor the promise of the harvest that is reaped. We need to distinguish between the gift and the giver. Pressing financial need puts the gift itself at centre stage. But mature fundraising and biblical stewardship is always about nurturing the giver and this is Paul's focus here.

Now sowing is always a sowing into some field and the ministry of the local church is one of the fields in which we are to sow. Church leaders must become more skilled in presenting the financial needs of the church in terms of ministry and lives changed rather than the survival of an institution. It is precisely at this point that unhealthy comparisons are made with parishes next door paying less share, or alleged failures of pastoral care or wrong decisions by the PCC.

Seed

Verse 8 develops the farming imagery further. It is God the abundant provider who provides the seed we scatter. Paul's language trips over itself trying to express this abundance of God as he links 'abound' (*perissuein*) used earlier in chapter 8, with the pregnant phrase 'in all things, always, everywhere' (more powerful still in the alliterative Greek phrase *panti pantote pasan*). Any sparse sowing is not for want of seed, but for want of trust in the heart of the sower or the desire to hold on to what has been given. But in the economics of grace, to hold on to what we have is to receive little blessing in return. God's provision means we will have enough to live and enough to give and share in every good work.

All of which begs the question – how much seed do we need? The clue may lie in Paul's use of *autarkeia* in verse 8. This carefully chosen word was used by the ancient philosophers called the Stoics to describe their quest for 'self-sufficiency'. Stoics wanted to reduce their need to depend on externals, upon other people. In mainstream Greek thought, the word came to be used of having enough to live on, a pre-condition of human freedom. Paul has his own take on this word. It means contentment in Philippians 4:11 and here God's abundance is not given so that we can live adequately but so that we can be generous in every good work. Contentment gives us the freedom to be generous; to be self-sufficient is to have the freedom to give not the freedom to hoard, to retain and to possess.

Mature stewardship is a liberating experience: receiving with gratitude and gladness, sharing with generosity and finding contentment and enjoyment in what we have. To not have enough to live, whether in the absolute terms of third-world poverty or the relative poverty in this country, is an offence to God's purpose in creation and should be challenged with all means at our disposal. It is precisely this that Paul is addressing through the collection, lest we lose sight of its purpose. The abundance of God's giving is not a

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green light to the accumulation of riches but an invitation into the economy of receiving and giving that is at the heart of the kingdom of God. Stewardship is inextricably linked with spirituality and is never reducible to how much I can get away with giving.

We should also note that the obligation to extend and share grace through our giving rests upon all Christian people, whatever their personal circumstances. They must make an appropriate response for themselves. We must never assume on behalf of others that they cannot afford to give and so deny access to the economy of grace by failing to nurture generous givers.

Harvest

What is the harvest that giving reaps? Clearly we cannot exclude financial blessing because this is precisely what the Jerusalem Christians would receive. But to find in these verses a crude promise of financial reward for speculative giving is to miss the entire point of Paul's teaching. Copernicus first taught the medieval world that the sun is at the centre of our galaxy and not of our world. We need, as Methodist minister Dan R Dick says, a Copernican revolution in our understanding of giving. That which is truly life giving, the glory and grace of God, must be at the centre of our lives and we must find our proper orbit around that life-giving grace.

Paul is clear that the two results of faithful obedient giving are first the expression of praise and thanksgiving to God in verse 13 and, second, the prayers and longing for the Corinthians from the Jerusalem church. (Note that the 'they' of verse 13 is the Jerusalem church not the Corinthians as suggested in some English translations.) In Romans 15: 27 Paul is quite specific that, as the Gentiles share in the spiritual blessings of the Jerusalem church, so Jerusalem should share their material blessings. In brief, this is the economy of grace. God is the giver of all that is needed not only for living but for generous giving. As we give, so we reap spiritual blessings in which words like joy, freedom, contentment and obedience are all central.

The collection to which Paul devoted so much of his apostolic energy and longed for the Corinthians to share was a material sign of some healing of the split with Paul, of their identification with other churches and recognition of the unique place of the Jerusalem church within the history of salvation. Paul ends with a heartfelt ascription of praise and glory to God, who is both the source and the goal of life-giving grace.

Leaders

The tough question is: how are we sowing – richly or reluctantly? The promise in this passage is that God will multiply what we sow back to us in everything –spiritual blessing, the gift of contentment, of peace of heart and mind. The challenge is that we need to sow before we can reap. There is a domino effect in giving: when we learn to give,

precisely because money is so close and important to us, it releases lots of other areas of our lives. Are we ready to put God to the test, to trust his promises?

Planned givers

A second tough question might be: Which field are you sowing in: your field or God's? We cannot separate money from lifestyle. If all that we have is sown in the field of our own personal choices and satisfaction, then we miss out on the blessing twice. Once because no matter how much we sow in our own field, it will never be enough. Second because there will be so little left to be sown in God's field and therefore so little spiritual harvest to be enjoyed.

Plate givers

Michael Green tells a story of mercenary soldiers fighting in the Crusades and needing to be baptised but keeping their sword arms out of the water! It conjures a mental image of us being baptised, holding our wallets and purses out of the water: 'Lord, please not this as well!' Paul said that deciding to give, to be involved in the collection, was a test of the faith of the Corinthians. I can give my time and my talents to the ministry of the church but the acid test is whether I will give my money as well. In truth, those who give most generously will give of all three together, in proportion to what God has given to them.