

First to the Lord

19th Weekend after Pentecost – October 14/15, 2006

Sermon Background Study

2 Corinthians 8:1-5, 7, 12, 24 (NRSV)

We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; ²for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. ³For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, ⁴begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints— ⁵and this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us . . .

⁷Now 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.

¹²For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have.

²⁴Therefore openly before the churches, show them the proof of your love and of our reason for boasting about you.

The poor Christians of Macedonia point the way to grace-filled giving that has the power to transform.

Begging . . . a topic too easily associated with annual church operating campaigns. Nervous pastors around the country are worrying whether a “begging Sunday” will be in the cards this year. But today’s passage from Paul’s letter to the Corinthian Christians turns this on its head.

Who’s begging? (v. 4)

The text box at the right gives you some important background to today’s Scripture passage. Paul is encouraging the Corinthian Christians to be generous and to support his collection for the poverty-stricken believers in Jerusalem. And he begins this lengthy section of the letter (chapters 8 & 9) by lifting up the Macedonian Christians as role models for the Corinthians.

The Macedonian Christians, principally those in Philippi and Thessalonica, are poor and suffering a severe ordeal. We don’t know the specifics but times are tough. Now, their poverty doesn’t mean that God hasn’t blessed them or that his grace has been withheld. Rather, God’s grace has been poured out on them. They are a joyful people whose extreme poverty has, paradoxically,

Paul’s Collection for Jerusalem

In his letter to the Galatians (2:1-10), Paul tells the story of a meeting in Jerusalem to settle the question of whether Gentile converts must first become Jews in order to become followers of Jesus; namely, whether they must be circumcised and keep the Law (see Acts 15 also).

The leaders of the Christian community, James, Peter, and John (the “pillars” as Paul describes them) agree with Paul that circumcision was not a requirement. All that marks out the body of Christ is faith in Christ. They also agree on a division of labor. James and the other pillars will continue to work among their fellow Jews, bringing to them the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul (and Barnabas) would go to the Gentiles.

All that the pillars ask of Paul and Barnabas is that they “remember the poor,” which Paul is “eager to do” (Galatians 2:10). This seems at first glance like a general request, but we find in Paul’s letters that this is actually a specific mission.

The “poor” in mind here are the poverty-stricken among the Christian community in Jerusalem, all of whom are Jews who have embraced Jesus as Messiah. Indeed, most scholars agree that poverty characterized the entire Christian community in Jerusalem. There were surely a variety of factors at work, such as persecution by the Jewish authorities and a series of bad harvests in the mid-forties AD. The Christians’ practice of using capital to meet current needs (the selling of property described in Acts 4 and 5) may also have contributed.

In any event, Paul undertakes throughout his missionary travels to collect money that he and a large contingent of Gentile Christians plan to take to Jerusalem. It seems that his appeal met with little success in the churches of Galatia but, as in today’s passage, was embraced beyond his expectations by the churches in Macedonia (i.e., Thessalonica and Philippi). The Christians in Corinth had made a commitment to the collection and Paul urges them to follow through on their commitment (2 Corinthians 8:10-11).

Paul embraces this collection for the poor believers in Jerusalem as an act of compassion, but also as enacted theology. For Paul, the collection is a concrete way of demonstrating the unity of the church – Gentile believers helping out Jewish believers. Paul knows with how suspiciously many Jewish believers have viewed his ministry to the Gentiles. When not the specific subject at hand, these divisions are an important subtext in many of Paul’s letters. Paul preaches unity, but he is a wise man who knows that money can sometimes talk louder than words.

overflowed in an extreme generosity that has made them wealthy – in the riches of Christ. Paul is raising money, yes, but the Macedonian Christians’ generosity is unmatched. Their desire to share what little they have is so overwhelming that they beg Paul to take their money! . . . *stop there* . . . It is the *givers* who are begging, not Paul. They beg for the privilege of participating in this act of service to others.

Begging someone, even St. Andrew, to take my money hasn’t my pattern. I’ve been a willing giver, even enthusiastic at times. But *begging* . . . well, that image of these suffering Christians moves my heart. And don’t you know Paul hopes that it moves the hearts of the Corinthians as well.

“First to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us” (v. 5)

The Macedonians surprised even Paul, giving beyond their means, begging for the privilege. But Paul knows that more than money is at play here. These Christians have given themselves “first to the Lord” and also to Paul (“to us”).

Paul opens 2 Corinthians by referring to himself as “an apostle of Christ Jesus, by the will of God.” The Macedonians have accepted this and submitted themselves to Paul’s leadership. Paul disavows any right to domineer over these Christians (1:24) and emphasizes that he exercises his authority for good (10:8; 3:10), for building up these communities of faith. The Macedonians’ giving is not primarily a response to the Gospel nor is it an outgrowth of their prayer. Rather, their response to the collection demonstrates, as Martin puts it, that the power of the Lord at work in Paul’s ministry justifies the collection itself.¹

Thus, as we begin our fall campaign, it is a fair question to ask whether we see the power of Christ at work in St. Andrew. If we do, then the only response can be enthusiastic generosity. If we do not, then we have to ask ourselves whether we are the community God intends us to be.

Excelling in everything (v.7)

After pointing the Corinthians toward the generosity of the Macedonian Christians, Paul urges them to consider the many gifts that God has showered upon them. Evidently, these house churches are filled with some talented and gifted people. They excel in many things; Paul wants them to excel in generosity as well. It is a bit like the old adage about much being expected of those to whom much is given. One need only walk around St. Andrew any day to realize how apt these words are for us.

“According to what one has” (v.12)

After encouraging the Corinthians to follow the example of Christ, he urges them to finish what they started. They had made a commitment to support his collection and they are to follow through. Paul assures them that he is not asking for a super-human effort. He knows that people vary in their means. Some of the Corinthians have a lot of money, others do not. Each person should give according to their means, giving out of what they do have, not out of what they don’t have. As he goes on to say in the letter, Paul is not asking for anything other than fairness among the entire Christian community. Those who have money now, sharing with those who don’t, knowing that the tables could well be reversed some day.² Paul hopes that the Corinthians will be eager givers – based on what they have.³

“The proof of your love” (v. 24)

Too many churches make the mistake of dancing around the issue of money, acting apologetic each time it is necessary to fund the next year’s ministries. Paul doesn’t dance. He unabashedly urges the Corinthians to show the other churches the proof of their love. Paul has boasted about the Corinthians and he knows that their generosity that will show that his boasting was well-founded.

Time and again we see in Paul’s letters 100% confidence in his Lord, in the Gospel, in his own calling, and in his work. He doesn’t seek any half-hearted giving to support a half-hearted ministry. Paul desires robust, eager, and sacrificial giving that reflects the Lord and Gospel that Paul proclaims.

¹from Ralph Martin’s commentary on 2 Corinthians in the *Word Biblical Commentary*.

²Earlier, Paul had even helped them learn how to give, putting something aside each week, so that they wouldn’t have to take a giant collection when he came (1 Corinthians 16:1-2). Paul is the picture of a practical pastor.

³The biblical tithe follows this. Because it is a percentage of income, those with more give more. I’m sure Paul would be happy to see us all follow John Wesley’s example of giving away everything above what he needed to live – “progressive tithing” we might call it. After the success of *A Purpose-Driven Life*, Rick Warren and his wife live off 10% of what he makes and gives away 90%, turning the tithe on its head, in addition to having repaid every bit of salary the church ever paid him.

Thru the Bible Daily Bible Readings

October 15 ~ 21

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help.

Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Sunday Jeremiah 50-52; Isaiah 27 God's final word on the people's coming deliverance from Babylon; Isaiah: God's promise that Israel would one day be a fruitful vineyard.</p>	<p>Monday Lamentation 1-2; Isaiah 28 Lamentations is a soulful cry over the death of Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians</p>
<p>Tuesday Lamentations 3-5; Isaiah 29 Isaiah brings God's words of woe for David's city, Jerusalem</p>	<p>Wednesday 1 John 1-3; Isaiah 30 1 John is a letter from the apostle John; look for the many contrasts: light and dark, sin and forgiveness</p>
<p>Thursday 1 John 4-5; Isaiah 31 John makes the remarkable claim that "God is love"; Isaiah issues a warning to those who would rely on the power of Egypt</p>	<p>Friday 2 & 3 John; Isaiah 32 2 & 3 John are cover letters accompanying 3 John; Isaiah: a word-picture of the kingdom of God</p>
<p>Saturday A day for reflection and catching up</p>	

