

**October 25, 2009**

## **2 Corinthians: Ministry Through Giving**

**Purpose:** To help us recognize the joy of giving to others in response to God's great gift to us

Key Bible reference: 2 Corinthians 8-9

Key Verse: 2 Corinthians 9.6

### **Biblical Interpretation**

Today's lesson focuses on how ministry through giving—money, talent, time, empathy—is made possible through the gift God has given us in Jesus Christ. Paul stresses that giving is not a burden put upon us but an opportunity we are given. As God has given to us, so we in turn give from that abundance.

Paul intended to collect an offering from Gentile churches, including those in Macedonia and Achaia, and take it to Jerusalem, where those in the church were experiencing extreme poverty. Paul saw this offering as a ministry to the Jerusalem Christians (2 Corinthians 8:4; Romans 15:25-26). But he also had committed himself to gather funds to help support the Jerusalem Christians when they had agreed to his mission to the Gentiles (Galatians 2:1-10). Thus, Paul had at least two reasons for gathering funds from believers in Achaia and Macedonia.

Although Paul spent significant time in the city of Ephesus, there is no record of the church there taking part in the collection for the Jerusalem church. Ephesus was in the Roman province of Asia (not to be confused with the continent of the same name), in the western part of Asia Minor. One more province where the churches had been asked to collect money was Galatia [guh-LAY-shuh], not on the map. Galatia was located farther east in Asia Minor, toward Jerusalem.

2 Corinthians 9:1-5. A phrase that appears in 2 Corinthians 8:4 as well as in 9:1 is "the ministry to the saints." The term saints here refers specifically to the original Christian congregation, the followers of the Way in Jerusalem. Perhaps because this church had broken away from its Jewish roots, perhaps for other reasons, the poverty among these "saints" was extreme.

Paul tells the Corinthians, "I know your eagerness" to be able to share generously with the Jerusalem saints (2 Corinthians 9:2). In fact, he tells them that he has been "boasting about you to the people of Macedonia, saying that Achaia has been ready since last year (verse 2).

Remember that Achaia was not a city but a Roman province. Corinth was in Achaia just as Atlanta is in Georgia and Toronto is in Ontario. A province covered a large geographic area and included a number of cities and towns. Corinth was the chief city in the province of Achaia. (Note that when Paul wrote to Christians in the city of Philippi, he was writing to Macedonians; for Philippi was located in the province of Macedonia.) In 2 Corinthians 8-9 Paul seems to recognize, perhaps even encourage, a bit of inter-province rivalry between the churches in Macedonia and Achaia.

Paul explains to Corinth a problem that has struck Macedonia. The Macedonians are facing a time of extreme poverty themselves (2 Corinthians 8:2). Nevertheless, they have shown

a "wealth of generosity" (8:2) in their donations for the Jerusalem church.

Paul is asking the Corinthians to give "according to [their] means" (2 Corinthians 8:11). He tries not to irritate them by asking them to match the Macedonians, whose gifts were "even beyond their means" (8:3).

Paul promotes the project at every opportunity. The city of Rome was far away from Achaia and Macedonia. Paul had not been there at the time he wrote the Letter to the Romans. Yet Paul informs his Roman readers (in a letter probably written from Corinth) that he is "going to Jerusalem in a ministry to the saints; for Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to share their resources with the poor among the saints at Jerusalem" (Romans 15:25-26).

Earlier, Paul had offered practical advice to the Corinthians, suggesting a way they could be generous and yet avoid major expenditures at any given time: "Now concerning the collection for the saints: you should follow the directions I gave to the churches of Galatia. On the first day of every week ... put aside and save whatever extra you earn, so that collections need not be taken when I come" (1 Corinthians 16:1-2).

Paul himself has organized a thorough, businesslike approach to raising funds. He will not handle all the money himself. Titus and two other "brothers" have been given responsibility for safeguarding the money received and for administering it (2 Corinthians 8:16-24). Paul has a strategy. "I am sending the brothers" (2 Corinthians 9:3), he says. Just in case you have not begun to assemble your gift, expect Titus and two companions to give you a nudge "so that you may be ready" (9:3).

I will be arriving later, Paul says. If by chance "some Macedonians come with me and find that you are not ready, we would be humiliated—to say nothing of you—in this undertaking" (2 Corinthians 9:4). The New International Version (NIV) translation is, "If any Macedonians come with me and find you unprepared, we—not to say anything about you—would be ashamed of having been so confident." Notice the subtle shift of the potential blame to Paul's own shoulders. He is saying, "It isn't you Corinthians who will be embarrassed for failure to get the offering together. The shame will fall on me for having been so confident."

And yet, if the Corinthians do have a gift ready when the Macedonians arrive, it will be seen as a gift of love, a response to God's bestowal of grace. That is why Paul feels it "necessary to urge the brothers to go on ahead to you" to help you get your gift in order "as a voluntary gift and not as an extortion" (2 Corinthians 9:5).

The suspicion and criticism of Paul within the church at Corinth must also have played a part in the arrangements Paul has made. Paul does not want to allow the slightest chance that he could be accused of pocketing the money or siphoning off a sizeable percentage for "administrative expenses."

We live in a period when money can be transferred electronically. We have travelers' checks, clearinghouses, auditors, international exchange rates, and safes in motel rooms and on shipboard. Consequently, we may forget how complex the problem would have been for Paul to move funds from one place to another. If we had to carry large sums of cash, we would experience a high degree of anxiety and a low degree of trust during every step of the journey.

Verses 6-8. Paul's talents as a preacher come to the forefront as he reminds his readers, "The one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully" (2 Corinthians 9:6); or, as the Good News Bible (Today's English Version, TEV) translates it, "The person who plants few seeds will have a small crop; the one who plants many seeds will have a large crop." Along with this proverbial advice, Paul reminds the Corinthians that whatever they do must be of their own volition, "not reluctantly or under compulsion" (verse 7). He then adds, in a remark similar to one found in the Greek Old Testament version of Proverbs 22:8, "God loves a cheerful giver."

Finally, in 2 Corinthians 9:8, Paul makes the point that God will always provide for believers' needs precisely so they can in turn attend to the needs of others. God gives so that we can give; God's giving is a prompting for our giving.

Verses 10-15. Having quoted the Greek Old Testament version of Psalm 112:9 (2 Corinthians 9:9), Paul alludes to other passages from the Greek Old Testament in 2 Corinthians 9:10: Isaiah 55:10 and Hosea 10:12. Again, the emphasis is on God supplying seed for continued sowing. TEV may offer deeper insight in its rendering of 2 Corinthians 9:11. Instead of "You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity," TEV puts it this way: "He will always make you rich enough to be generous at all times." The very offering of gifts from the abundance God has given is itself praise to God, Paul maintains (verse 12). That is to say, since God is the source of human abundance. God is glorified when we share that abundance with others. Giving is a form of praise!

In the final three verses, Paul praises God for the mutuality or give-and-take of human relationships. Remember, the Christians in

Jerusalem had given their blessing to Paul's mission to Gentiles (Galatians 2:10). Now, Paul tells the Corinthians that in sharing their bounty with "the saints," they are glorifying God and being blessed in return by "the saints'" prayers and good will. Paul sees this bond—God the giver, the recipient who gives in turn to those in need, and those in need who thank God for the gifts they receive from the hands of others as a glorious community of love.

The counsel Paul offers in 2 Corinthians 8-9 is often described as a lesson in stewardship. But we should understand that Paul is saying, like Saint Francis of Assisi would later say, that we receive to give, and in giving we receive. These words of Paul to the Corinthians may have more direct application to our times than anything else he wrote.