

2 Corinthians

Sermon reflections

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Poverty and Generosity



Reflection Questions

1. What examples do you have, in your own life and other people's, of generosity springing from 'joy and poverty'?
2. What does it mean to you and your church to give 'first to the Lord'?
3. How do we experience the truth that Jesus became poor so we might become rich?

The reversal of human values in this passage is overwhelming. The generosity of the Macedonians (v.2) springs from their abundant joy and their extreme poverty. In human terms that hardly makes sense, but so often an awareness of our own poverty makes us conscious of the needs of others. I have experienced the hospitality of Sri Lankan tea planters, desperately poor themselves, anxious to provide hospitality to visitors from the UK. Collecting for Christian Aid is often easier in more deprived areas than from the more affluent.

The Macedonians begged for the privilege of giving (v.4). Sometimes this does happen, and God gives the grace to respond to a human emergency such as flooded homes. Yet too often we give only what we think we can spare. Giving is too often a duty rather than a privilege. The Macedonians gave even beyond their means. Their values had been overturned as they longed to share with others.

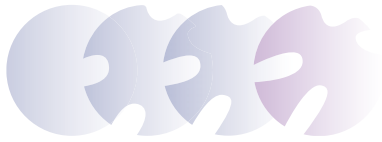
'First to the Lord' (v.5) is the key phrase to this passage. There is an overwhelming sense of the generosity of God that brings a response in giving to the Lord. Our commitment to Christ is at the heart of all our generosity. It is when we know the generosity of our Lord Jesus Christ (v.9) that our lives will overflow in giving 'first to the Lord' and then to others (v.5). For a family or a church, one of the most fulfilling moments of life in Christ is as we determine our giving to others, prayerfully, maybe sitting round a kitchen table and experiencing the joy of giving as we have received.

Paul is not prepared to command the Corinthians (v.8) but he is prepared to challenge them. Their giving has to be voluntary, but Paul regards pressure as quite legitimate. He does not simply say that it is up to them to decide how much to give. He challenges them to demonstrate the love they claim to have. Maybe we are too timid in asking one another to show our love by our generosity. Even comparisons are legitimate – so the genuineness of our love is to be compared with the earnestness of other people's love.

All this depends on the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Verse 9 is the greatest single verse upholding the meaning of the incarnation. That is what Jesus has done for me. He demonstrated his love by giving all of himself. We enter into the richness of that giving. So we are freed to give of ourselves because we have the ultimate security of knowing his love. ■

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Completion and Equality



Reflection Questions

1. What projects of your church now need a renewed vision to achieve completion?
2. Is mutuality yet part of your lifeblood or that of your church?
3. What would it mean for me to live according to a principle of 'enough'?

This must be the origin of the idea of the 'completer/finisher' (v.10), now seen as essential to the work of any team! Our lives and our churches are littered with examples of projects begun and never finished. So we need to ensure that our vision is realistic (v.11) and that we have the determination to see it through. This is often more a matter of clarity of purpose and determination than of finance. Paul suspects that the Corinthians have lost their initial impetus and gives advice (v.10) to help them to restore their commitment to completing the task.

This will be helped by realism (v.12). There is a place in our lives for longing for a perfect world, but that needs to be firmly rooted in action to improve the present. This relates to the slogan to 'think globally and act locally'. It may apply particularly to environmental issues. No church on its own can halt global warming. All of us have a responsibility to ensure that our own buildings and lifestyle enable us to walk gently on the earth.

The phrase 'fair balance' (v.13, repeated in v.14) is more accurately translated as 'equality'. Maybe the NRSV translators balked at so crude a phrase! Paul has no such inhibitions. Equality of provision is his aim. The idea that more-equal societies provide more fulfilment for richer and poorer alike has gained some political currency of late, though we shy away from the implications for policy. For Christians there is no doubt. Mutuality (vv.13-14) means that those with abundance must relieve those without. When this is understood, then that support of one another becomes part of the lifeblood of the church.



This is exemplified by the story of the manna (v.15; Exodus 16:18). However much or little the Israelites collected, they ended up with enough. We are dominated by the desire to have more, of food, comfort, possessions. We need to reflect on what is enough, and live our lives according to that principle. It is the antidote to materialism. It means we do not need continually to strive for more. It means that contentment which Paul so often commends (Phil. 4:12; 1 Tim. 6:8) – and the ability to contribute to the common good. ■

Promises and Personalities



Reflection Questions

1. What times are there when we (or our church) act out of ill grace – so that our giving feels more like extortion than voluntary gift?
2. What sort of reputation do Christians, and the church, have in our community?
3. Are there those we should challenge (it may be ourselves!) to ensure that promises are kept and Jesus' generosity reflected?

This passage demonstrates the importance of personal contact. In a world of Twitter and emails, personal relationships can seem less important. We have friends we have never met and never intend to meet. However, we quickly miss out on those qualities that are demonstrated only when we encounter one another. Titus is a volunteer (vv.16,17). Paul had not been entirely sure of his commitment (v.6) but Titus has proved more enthusiastic than Paul dared hope. So often our volunteering is less than gracious. We act out of a sense of duty rather than with eagerness for the gospel (vv.17,18). Titus and 'the brother' (no point in trying to guess who he was!) show enthusiasm for the good news (v.18), and so an administrative duty becomes a demonstration of gospel love.

The question of reputation (v.21) needs reflection. The commitment is 'first to the Lord' (v.5) and we do what is right in the Lord's sight (v.21) but Paul is concerned for his own reputation and that of the church. The Christian church often does not have a reputation for generosity or integrity. Bishops are seen as living in luxury. Churches are more concerned with asking for money than giving. They are not even seen as safe places for children. All this harms the attraction of the gospel. 'Let your light shine before others,' said Jesus (Matt. 5:16). Christians and Christian churches are called to demonstrate the love of God we have received and share.

Paul has used Macedonian generosity to encourage the Corinthians (8:2). Now he reveals that he has also used the Corinthians' promises to stir up the Macedonians (9:2). Now he is in danger of being embarrassed by the Corinthians' failure to deliver (v.4). Paul's trust may be being betrayed. We have a tendency to agree on the spur of the moment, sometimes without even intending to fulfil our word. That can go for our giving. We fill in a form but our prayer and commitment are not there. Our piece of the jigsaw is missing.



Even when the intention is there (v.2) the fulfilment of a promise is not always achieved (v.3). There can be a Christian duty to challenge one another on how our promises are finding completion. The brothers (v.5) have the task of holding the Corinthians to their promise. They may not like it, but they need to understand the effect of lack of integrity. The generosity of Jesus (8:9) is gracious gift. It is also gracious challenge for our own Christian lives. ■

Grace and Thanks



Reflection Questions

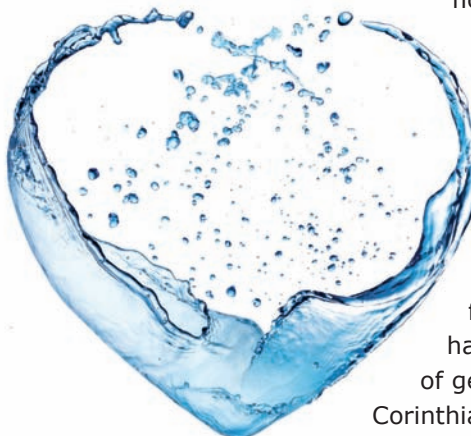
1. How does cheerfulness become the heart of our giving as churches and individuals?
2. Is there a right competitiveness between Christians and churches as emerges here between Corinth and Macedonia?
3. What are the marks of the 'indescribable gift' that God gives?

These two words (vv.14,15) represent different translations of the Greek *charis*. These two chapters can be seen as a play on the word that is impossible to reproduce in English. Where it is seen as an expression of God's nature in action, it is usually translated grace (8:1 and 9:9,14). Where it is an expression of human response, it may be translated as privilege (8:4), generous undertaking (8:6,19) or thanks (8:16; 9:15). These examples draw together the grace of God and the human generosity that results. God wants us to be cheerful in our giving (v.7) because he provides blessing (*charis* again v.8) in abundance. Christians have sometimes been tempted to see blessing as a reward for virtue. For Paul it is precisely the other way round. Generosity is the natural response to blessing.

Sharing in good work (v.8) and cheerful giving (v.7) are marks of grace (*charis!*). There is something lost in our commendable habit of giving by direct debit and ensuring regular support for charities. We may not experience that spontaneity which comes in knowing God's grace and responding to it. Maybe in the regular reassessment of our giving we can know the grace and overflowing gratitude that infuse these chapters.

There is a virtuous circle here that expresses that personal relationship between the people of Christ and their generous God. So generosity does indeed provide for those in need (v.12). It also overflows in thanksgivings to God. The two cannot be separated, and both result from God's blessing (v.8). The whole picture is of an exciting faith that makes our whole being respond in generosity.

That is not without cost (v.13). There is a challenge to recognise that we have enough (v.8). Remember the Macedonians (8:2), whose generosity flowed from joy and poverty. This is no giving away of the scraps after we have fed ourselves. It is an integral part of our being.



So the chapters end in thanks (*charis*). God has given us so much (v.15). There is no more to be said and, if that is where we find ourselves, then all that Paul has fought for through this exposition of generosity will be the mark of the Corinthian church. ■