

2 Corinthians 8:1-15

How believers use their resources -- time, money, talents, and attention – is a reflection of what they believe about God and God's actions in the world. Furthermore, how those resources are used preaches a message to others. Paul wants the Corinthians' actions to be a reflection of the gospel in which they believe.

As we have seen, Paul's ministry was about reconciliation, God has reconciled us to Godself and to one another. This can only be authentically embodied in a life of "service" freely given for others. An important dimension of the apostolic work of spreading the gospel to the Gentiles was raising funds, from among the Gentiles for the poor among the Jewish-Christians in Jerusalem.

Central to Paul's appeal to Corinthians to give to the Jerusalem collection is the theme of "grace" – God's freely given gift, which flows within and through us on to others. However, the significance of this theme may be obscured by the fact that the Greek word *charis* which Paul uses, is translated in a number of ways in this and the following chapter. It has been translated as grace, blessings, generous act, thanks, and in relation to the collection, as privilege and generous undertaking, a word that is the root of our word *charity*.

When Paul holds up the Macedonians as an exemplar of *charis* or giving, he emphasises the fact that it's God's grace that enabled their paradoxical abundant joy and extreme poverty to overflow with a wealth of generosity in the midst of a particularly difficult time. His appeal to the Corinthians is rooted in their "overflowing" with all sorts of spiritual gifts, including Paul's love for them, so that they too might overflow in this *grace*. Of course, Paul's primary exemplar is Christ's grace. Though rich, he became poor for our sakes so that by his poverty we might become rich

Two points are central to the advice Paul gives about giving as he describes the Macedonians' contributions. First, giving is to be voluntarily and not done out of compulsion. Second, it is to be done on the basis of what one has and not on what one does not have; the point is not to be greedy with what one has. Paul is **not** calling for extreme self-denial or asceticism.

Paul's intent in all this is not to put pressure on the Corinthians, but rather simply to call for equality or "fair balance." God's overflow of grace not only grounds the possibility of our being reconciled with one another, but it also grounds the possibility of our being able to have genuine reciprocity with one another. Our current overflow meets another's current need, so that at some other point in time their overflow may be there for us in our time of need.

After all, is this not what *koinonia* is all about – not only sharing in one another’s pain and joy, but also sharing in one another’s poverty and wealth.

Paul appeals for funding for the community of Jesus’ followers in Jerusalem led by James, called the "Poor Ones." The church in Jerusalem took sharing very seriously. Whatever they had as one Christian community was shared equally among them. In this offering that Paul is asking for, he is trying to bring together Jewish Christians in Jerusalem and pagan Christians from throughout the rest of the world; many of whom he had evangelized. This appeal was for the cause of unity for the early church, because of the terrible schism between these two groups.

Moved by Paul’s preaching, a number of the Corinthians came to faith in Jesus Christ as the spiritual “children” of Paul. In their joy and gratitude, they promised to make a contribution to the poor in Jerusalem. Paul reminds them of their promised commitment to the collection. The Macedonian churches have given generously despite all their adversities. If the Macedonians, who have suffered terrible affliction, have given so great a gift, then the Corinthians can surely give just as generously.

Paul reminds the believers that their actions to support the Jerusalem poor demonstrate the earnestness of their faith. Paul re-frames the whole collection as the gospel enacted. He retells the good news through the lens of generosity. Christ gave up extraordinary riches so that others might receive the abundant wealth of God's grace.

The **size** of the Macedonians’ gift did not impress Paul as much as the liberality of that gift despite all their adversities. The Romans had taken over their silver and gold mines and were heavily taxing the Macedonians on the other minerals they were mining. In addition, they were facing ongoing persecution by the Roman authorities.

According to Paul, the Macedonian Christians were in “deep poverty,” so their situation could have served as an excuse for not giving at all to the “poor” in Jerusalem. Paul did not expect much from the Macedonians in the way of a contribution. However, Paul’s expectations are greatly exceeded. After all, the Macedonian Christians had been graciously saved through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ who gave himself for their salvation. How could they not give themselves to him? They are his servants, eager and willing to walk in his footsteps. If “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life,” how can they refuse to give to those in dire need?

First the Macedonians' gave generously at a time when they were poor themselves. Second, the Macedonians gave voluntarily. The term "voluntarily" fails to adequately express the spirit of the Macedonians. These people who were in "deep poverty" themselves, considered it a privilege to give generously and to share what little they had with those who had even less. The gift of the Macedonians shows their gratitude to God. They gave to those in Jerusalem who were their brothers and sisters in Christ. They gave to fellow-believers as evidence of their unity in Christ.

And they gave joyfully. Paul did not have to wrench the money from their hands; they readily and joyfully insisted on giving. They found great joy in what they were doing. In their affliction, the Macedonians experienced joy; in their deep poverty, they exhibited great generosity. What an amazing group of believers!

So, Paul uses them as a model for the Corinthians and a standard for their giving. The Corinthians excelled in many ways – in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in earnestness and zeal, and in love. Let them now excel in this gracious work of showing charity. The Corinthians are the ones who have means. They are urged to give generously with the knowledge that God has already provided abundantly for them for this very purpose: And God is able to provide them with every blessing in abundance, so that they may always have enough of everything and may provide in abundance for every good work.

By demonstrating the sincerity of their love by the sacrificial generosity of their gift to the needy in Jerusalem, the Macedonians have established a human benchmark against which the Corinthians' love can be measured. The earnestness of the Macedonians helps set the standard by which the Corinthians may prove the sincerity of their love.

There is, however, a much higher standard than this. The human benchmark of the Macedonians' love and generosity is far surpassed by the divine benchmark for love and sacrifice to those in need. Through faith in Jesus' sacrificial work on the Cross of Calvary, Christ has made all those who trust in him exceedingly rich.

Whatever we might do for those who are poor can never compare with the work of Christ on the cross. Our material wealth can never compare to his heavenly glory; and our sacrificial poverty can never compare to the "poverty" he endured in his incarnation. The person and work of Christ is the basis for our motivation, and it is the standard for our ministry. The cross of Christ, that message which seems foolish to the unbelieving, is the unending theme of all of Paul's teaching.

Paul clearly indicates that his words are not a commandment directly communicated to the Corinthians from God through Paul. He does not legislate how much the Corinthians should give. Paul's opinion is that generous giving is a desirable thing which works to the donor's advantage.

A year ago, the Corinthians, were the very first of the churches to make a commitment to contribute. If the Corinthians were the first to begin to give, and they are not yet ready with their contribution (as other churches are), then it is now the time to complete their commitment. In a year's time, some things surely must have changed. However, Paul does not lay a guilt trip on the Corinthians. They should simply complete what they started, but only within the means they have to do so.

Some people want to do something great for God, something big and significant. For whatever reason, this is not always possible. But rather than not doing what they hope to do, they do nothing at all, waiting for a time when they can do all they want. Paul urges those Corinthians who have suffered setbacks to do whatever they are able to do now, thus completing their giving so their contributions can be collected and sent to those in dire need. Titus was on his way back from Macedonia to gather and deliver their contribution to the Jerusalem church. Paul does not want to be embarrassed by their incomplete undertaking.

Paul concludes his exhortation with the statement, "it is acceptable according to what a man has, not according to what he does not have." Paul urges the Corinthians to keep their commitment according to their ability to do so. He now further clarifies himself by laying out two governing principles: the principle of equality and the principle of reciprocity.

In teaching the principle of equality, Paul does not suggest that we give up our right to own private property; neither does he indicate that everyone must live on exactly the same standard. But when one believer has more than the one who is in dire need, he or she should seek to narrow the economic distance between them, rather than widen it.

In the New Testament as well as the Old, the desire to accumulate and hoard great wealth was condemned, while charity was praised. The bottom line is this: when we realize that a sibling is in dire need, and we have the resources to alleviate that need, we should generously and joyfully do so. Equality should be our aspiration.

The second principle is that of reciprocity. Paul says that while we may have more today so that we can help our siblings in need, there may very well come a day when "the tables are turned" Generosity we show now toward a sister or brother in need may become generosity

from that same sister or brother to us when we are in a time of need.

God does not prosper God's people so that they may indulge themselves; God prospers some so that they may share with those in need. In so doing, they demonstrate their kinship as those who trust in God. In spite of our great wealth as a nation and as individuals, this kind of generosity is foreign to many.

Many Christians give trivial amounts out of their wealth, and many give nothing at all. Of all the things to which Christians give today, an incredibly small portion of our giving is to the poor in other parts of the world. This part of Paul's letter is foreign to some not because it doesn't address conditions in the world and the church today; it is foreign because many Christians are oblivious to the needs of God's poorer children around the world.

Then, as now, often those whose resources are limited are the most generous like the Macedonians. Those who have done without are often the most sensitive to the needs of others who are doing without. Giving to the poor is not about being rich or having much; rather it is about having more, more than our siblings in dire need.

Since 1970, there has been a dramatic increase in refugees from around the world. In the mid-1970s there were fewer than 3 million refugees worldwide. Currently there are 100 million refugees in the world, about three times the population of Canada. These are people in the greatest dire need. Currently, one percent of the world's population, or one in 97 people have been forced to flee their homes according to the UN Refugee Agency. They are hungry, they are cold, they are sick, they have no place to call home. Forty percent of this group are children. Some children have only known life in a refugee camp.

Canadian Lutheran World Relief does impressive work with refugees. CLWR was established in 1946 to help the WWII refugees, the majority from Germany and Austria, followed by Eastern Europeans, many of whom were Lutherans and helped establish and fill many of our Lutheran congregations.

In 1979, CLWR became the first organization in the world to sponsor private refugees, making Canada the only country in the world to have private refugee sponsorships. Besides money, CLWR provides school kits, quilts, layettes and clothing. Just a few years ago, you may recall the request for sweaters for the coming cold season in refugee camps. Over 70,000 sweaters from Canada were collected. In the Toronto area, the sweaters were collected at one of the Conference-wide Reformation services. It took us hours to sort and package the sweaters and several trips to Home Hardware for free delivery to the CLWR

packing site in Winnipeg. What a great achievement!

CLWR is also known for its hands-on help in areas of disaster relief, following floods, earthquakes, hurricanes, and refugee camps. They partner with numerous organizations not to duplicate efforts and costs. CLWR administrative costs are about 3% of money raised.

By 2016 about 200 refugees had been sponsored through CLWR congregations. ELCIC congregations were challenged to sponsor 500 refugees by 2017 to commemorate the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. Privately-sponsored refugees do much better than those sponsored by the government in getting settled and acclimatized in their new environment. For those churches that would like to help but don't have the means, many of the refugee families can use a friend and moral support as well as help in finding apartments, jobs, doctors, schools for their children, ...

The needs are limitless, as is the opportunity to show our love for God's most needy here locally and around the world. We have our own Jerusalem poor living in deep poverty, who cry out for help. Surely the Spirit can act in new and startling ways in our churches today. How will the Spirit ask us to make use of our time, our talents, and our resources to display the Gospel in our world today?

As Paul told the Corinthians, our actions are a reflection of the Gospel in which we believe.

Amen.