

“His Inexpressible Gift”

The Seventh in a Series of Sermons on 2 Corinthians

Texts: 2 Corinthians 9:6-15; Psalm 112

We are going to do something we’ve never done before in the fifteen-year history of Christ Reformed Church—we will address Paul’s discussion of giving, specifically his discussion of the cheerful giver. That said, don’t run for the doors, or sneak out when the elders are not watching. I’ve long said that “Stewardship Sundays” and sermon series on tithing will never be conducted in this church as long as I have anything to do with it. Yet, Paul does address the Corinthians in regard to an offering being taken to help the poor in Jerusalem. One of the ways we can respond to the unbiblical whining, guilt-tripping, and personal empire-building which many of us have witnessed in the various churches from which we have come, is to work through what Paul actually says about Christian charity to support the missionary endeavors of the apostolic church. In an age such as ours, when so many seek money to support various worthy causes, it is important to consider what Paul actually says about the topic of Christian charity.

We are continuing our series on 2 Corinthians, and we now jump ahead from chapter six to chapters eight-nine, as we take up Paul’s discussion of the offering being taken in the Gentile churches for the struggling Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. There are two reasons why this offering is such an important item on Paul’s agenda among the newly-planted Gentile churches in Greece and Asia Minor.

The first reason is that a serious famine had hit central Palestine about this time (the mid to late 50's of the first century), causing great hardship throughout the Jerusalem area. This famine was especially tough on those Jews who had become followers of Jesus. Given the tension between the rapidly growing church in Jerusalem, and the Sanhedrin (the Jewish ruling body), any ethnic Jew who publicly identified themselves as a follower of Jesus Christ would have been immediately removed from the synagogue. And if you were cut off from the synagogue, you were cut off from the charity offered to synagogue members during time of shortages. No alms, no grain, no flour. This created a serious crisis for those struggling to survive a regional famine during a time of religious persecution.

The second reason why this offering was so important to Paul is the message it sends to the those in Jerusalem. There are two different audiences in view here. On the one hand, this offering from the Gentile churches would be a powerful testimony to the Sanhedrin regarding the truth of the gospel, as well as to Herod Agrippa, the token king and Roman puppet. Although some twenty years earlier, Jesus himself had risen from the dead (and had given many convincing proofs that he was alive), the Jews still did not believe the apostolic witness about him. Now found themselves confronted with a thriving church. On the other hand, this offering would also be a powerful demonstration of Christian charity to the persecuted and struggling Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. This offering would have fed many hungry people, and would also serve as a very powerful confirmation to the Jerusalem church about the spread of the gospel, and the transforming power of the risen Christ.

Although the offering from the Gentile world for the poor in Jerusalem would have been a significant witness to unbelieving Jews, it would have an even greater impact among the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, who were more than a bit skeptical about the church’s mission (and Paul’s in particular) to the Gentiles. Nothing would do more to heal the rift between the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem and those formerly godless Gentiles who believed that Israel’s Messiah was the son of God, than an offering such as this. Gentile charity for Jewish Christians would be a tremendous demonstration of Christian unity.

Recall from our study of the Book of James, during this time wealthy Gentile and Jewish landowners were taking advantage of the growing number of Jewish Christians who were suffering from the economic consequences of religious persecution. Jewish Christians could not find work. There was no charity (alms or grain) from the synagogue. People were going hungry. At the same time, the church was facing horrific opposition from both the Sanhedrin (unbelieving Israel) and the Romans (pagan Gentiles). In fact, James himself was martyred during this period. Jewish Christians in Jerusalem knew all about the occupation of the godless Romans and the resulting Gentile uncleanness throughout their sacred land. It was very difficult for these Jewish Christians to accept the fact that God was sending the gospel to the Gentile world, where, as we have seen, the response to the message of Christ crucified was overwhelming. These were very difficult times and the Jerusalem Christians were in dire need.

As for this second letter being sent by Paul to the Corinthians, Paul has been forced to defend his apostolic office against those whom he identifies as false apostles. He has spoken of the fact that God had opened the door for him to preach the gospel in Troas, and then Macedonia, at the very moment when Paul had reached such a point of despair he felt as though he could hardly go on. Paul refers to this open door as the triumphal procession of Christ, and as a fragrant aroma to the Lord. Having defended his apostolic authority and office in chapters 2-6, we now skip ahead to Paul's discussion of this collection being taken for the starving Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. The collection of this offering is the central theme of chapters 8:1-9:15, material which we will survey in this sermon.

We begin in chapter 8:1, and Paul's discussion about generosity and charity. Paul has been clear in both of his Corinthian letters that Christianity has very little in common with Greco-Roman paganism. At the end of his defense of his apostolic authority and office, Paul exhorted the Corinthians to come out from the paganism seeping into the Corinthian church, and to separate themselves from it—especially when it rears its head through the efforts of the false apostles undermining Paul. Furthermore, this paganism influences the very notion of charity. Most first-century Greco-Roman religions believed and taught that when you needed something from one of the “gods,” (good health, good crops, more children, etc.) you went to the appropriate temple, prayed for what you wanted, and then offered a sacrifice—which usually took the form of a gift which was used by the priests to maintain the temple (or as a gift to the priests for the religious services they rendered).

But as Paul points out, Christian charity is not founded upon the pagan principle that you “give to get,” or that God can be bribed by our gifts and sacrifices. As Paul contends in 2 Corinthians 8, beginning at verses 1-2, *“We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.”* The newly-founded churches of Macedonia were struggling greatly. Yet, they contributed generously to the offering which Paul was raising for the Jewish church in Jerusalem. For Paul, this generosity is a manifestation and a fruit of God's prior grace to the Macedonian Christians. The gospel had set them free from pagan darkness and the guilt of their sins, and so they are grateful for all that God had done for them. Although the Macedonians were in much the same financial shape as the Jerusalem Christians, they gave generously.

In fact, Paul states in verses 3-5, *“For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints—and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us.”* Paul indicates his pleasant surprise at the generosity of those in Macedonia, when they saw a genuine need (being in the midst of need themselves). As Paul puts it, these Christians had given themselves “to the Lord.” But more than offering money (of which they had little), they made themselves and whatever service they could available to Paul. As Paul writes in verse 6, *“accordingly, we urged Titus*

that as he had started, so he should complete among you this act of grace.” In this we begin to see the contrast Paul will establish between Christian charity—which is a response to the grace which God has shown to his people in the cross of Jesus Christ—and that of first century pagan notions of giving money to pacify an angry god, or to gain something that we want or need (“giving to get”).

Clearly, the church in Macedonia (to the north of Corinth) was suffering. But although the Corinthian church was wealthy (as first century churches go) things were no picnic in Corinth when Paul writes this second letter. In 1 Corinthians 7:26, Paul speaks of the hardships facing the Corinthians. We don’t know if this is a reference to external circumstances like famine, or economic hardship, or to the crisis facing the church because of the issues with which they were struggling due to the false apostles seeking to undermine Paul’s office and authority. Regardless of the difficulties, Paul asks the Corinthians to put their high opinion of themselves and spiritual gifts to use, given the pressing need in Jerusalem, and especially in light of the generosity of the Macedonians. *“But as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in our love for you—see that you excel in this act of grace also.”* The Corinthians have been given many spiritual gifts for the service of others about which they were boasting. To paraphrase Paul, “be generous to those who are suffering.”

To make sure that he’s not misunderstood, Paul clarifies his point in verse 8. *“I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine.”* Paul does not want the Corinthians doing as the pagans do—“give to get,” or to give out of a sense of guilt. But Paul does want those who are Christ’s people, and who have been boasting about their spiritual prowess, to demonstrate that they truly understand that the recipients of God’s love and grace are to be the first people to reciprocate when a need such as a famine arises. Christian charity is voluntary, and the blessings of giving are profound—as Paul will make clear in the following discussion.

In verse 9, Paul takes the Corinthians back to Jesus Christ and the gospel. *“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.”* Tragically, this verse is often torn from its context by many “prosperity gospel” types who argue that Paul is teaching that Jesus died for our lack of wealth (a sin), so that we might become wealthy (the material blessings of being a Christian). Wrong! This passage has nothing to do with our prosperity, but with Jesus Christ’s humiliation. In the covenant of redemption (“the covenant before the covenants”) Jesus knew and experienced eternal bliss and love in inter-Trinitarian fellowship with the Father and Holy Spirit. But in his incarnation, Jesus humbled himself, taking to himself a true human nature, so as to enter a world of human sin and rebellion and then live a life of perfect obedience to God’s law, to suffer and die for our sins, only to be raised to life from the dead.

There are several parallel passages in Paul’s letters. The first is the passage we covered several sermons ago (2 Corinthians 5:21). *“For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”* Galatians 4:4-5, comes to mind as well. *“But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.”* But Philippians 2:5-11 certainly stands out: *“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”* In imitating our Savior, we become servants of each other.

Paul is reminding the Corinthians that Jesus Christ (who is eternal God and second person of the Holy Trinity) came to earth to save us from the guilt and power of our sins. In his incarnation, and on the cross, we see the grace of God fully manifest. In the death of Jesus, we see how the richest of the rich became the poorest of the poor, to save us from our sins. In his resurrection from the dead, and through his ascension into heaven, we see him exalted to the right hand of God and given that name that is above every other name. Jesus did all of this for us, and in our place. Not one of us here did anything to earn or merit this kind of grace. Understanding this fact is where Christian charity begins.

Having made this point plain, in verse 10, Paul now offers his own opinion on the matter (in other words, he is not citing one of the memorized sayings of Jesus, or quoting from the Old Testament). But this opinion comes to us with Paul's apostolic authority and in the form of God-breathed scripture. *"And in this matter I give my judgment: this benefits you, who a year ago started not only to do this work but also to desire to do it."* Christians do not give to God to get something back. We don't give to God because we feel guilty if we don't. We give because it helps others. And in helping others, paradoxically, we benefit as well. So, even though the Corinthians started the collection for the poor of Jerusalem over a year before, it is now time for them to complete the offering and then send it on to Jerusalem. In fact, as Paul exhorts them in verse 11, *"So now finish doing it as well, so that your readiness in desiring it may be matched by your completing it out of what you have."*

For Paul, the amount one gives is strictly voluntary. He does not re-institute the Old Testament tithe, or even refer to it since Gentiles knew nothing about such Old Testament legislation. Although the apostolic church shared all their possessions in the opening chapter of Acts, Paul does not require communal living in the Gentile churches. In fact, just the opposite is true. *"For if the readiness is there, it is acceptable according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have."* The principle Paul lays down is very simple. Everything we have comes to us from a gracious and merciful God. The Corinthians are to give what they give, in light of what they already have. Although Paul exhorts the Corinthians to demonstrate charity to others (through this particular offering) Paul does not use guilt or manipulation in asking for money. He does not pressure the Corinthians to give anything. He simply informs them of the need (in Jerusalem), and reminds them of the value of charity toward those in need.

Paul is not a Marxist, nor a utopian. Private property is important to him (indeed the command not to steal presupposes the right to private ownership of the means of production). As he puts it in verses 13-14, *"for I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of fairness your abundance at the present time should supply their need, so that their abundance may supply your need, that there may be fairness."* Ordering the Corinthians give away everything would only make them poor too. Then the Corinthians would be in no shape to help anyone else, and would eventually need help themselves. But the principle Paul sets forth stands—those who are able to help others in need should do so. If the poor Christians in Macedonia contributed to this offering joyfully, then so should those in Corinth. The Macedonians should not bear this burden alone. It is only fair that the Corinthians (who were much wealthier) also contribute to this offering for the Jewish Christians of Jerusalem.

As we see throughout Paul's letters, the apostle turns to the Old Testament to validate his point, citing from Exodus 16:18) in verse 15. *"As it is written, 'Whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack.'" The passage Paul quotes speaks of God's gracious provision of manna to the Israelites during the Exodus. His point is that during the current era of redemptive history (the era of the New Covenant and the age of the Holy Spirit), all those in Christ receive more than enough to provide for each other when someone is in need. No doubt, God could have caused manna to rain down on the church in Jerusalem had he so wished. But in the New Covenant era, God's people are called to help one another, whether they are Jew or Gentile. This is what the body of Christ does. It rallies to help*

the other members of that body when there is a need. In doing so, we testify to the watching world that God is gracious to sinners and merciful to those who suffer.

After discussing the role of Titus in collecting the offering in 2 Corinthians 8:16-24, and then describing the nature of the collection being taken for the suffering Christians of Jerusalem in 2 Corinthians 9:1-5 (Paul says it is to be a willing gift, and not given out of fear or guilt), in verses 6-15, Paul returns to the subject of the reason why Christians are to give charitably. Once again, Paul spells out the Christian conception of charity against the backdrop of paganism.

In verse 6, Paul cites a well-known proverb. *“The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.”* This echoes a number of Old Testament texts, as well as a saying of Jesus. Paul is very clear here: giving is not commanded. But Paul does say there is a huge blessing associated with giving to those in need. The giver receives a blessing by helping someone, as well as a promise to be blessed as a result of doing so, which is why Paul cites the Proverb approvingly. Those who give freely, will receive much in return. But the “much in return” part is not necessarily monetary. And this is where we (and perhaps the Corinthians) so easily go off the rails. The promised blessing is not necessarily material. In fact, the best blessing of all is to bear the fruit described in verse 11 by Paul as that which leads to thanksgiving offered to God for all of his gracious provisions for both body and soul. Giving freely advances the cause of Christ, and it produces spiritual fruit in all kinds of way that we may never envision or realize in this life.

In verse 7, Paul again spells out the principle of Christian charity. *“Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”* Paul draws the principle from a number of Old Testament texts with a very loud echo from Proverbs 22:7-9 (LXX). We are to give from our abundance. We are to give freely (cheerfully). And we know that God approves and delights in such charity. We do not give to get something back from God. We do not give because we feel guilty or coerced. We do not give to appease an angry God. We freely give simply because it is good to give, and it helps those in need. And when we do so, God delights in it.

We also give, knowing that God creates what economists (especially Keynesians) call “the multiplier effect.” Says Paul, *“and God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work.”* God’s grace, manifest in the cross of Jesus Christ, delivers us from the guilt and power of sin. We, in turn, respond to that grace through faith and repentance, and through a desire (created by regeneration) obey the commandments of God. Because the Holy Spirit creates faith in our hearts through the preaching of the gospel and confirms that faith through the use of the sacraments, those in Christ will find themselves desiring to replicate God’s grace to them, through charity to others. Grace not only abounds to sinners, but it rebounds from us (justified sinners) to others in need. Not only does God provide for us (“sufficiency”—a technical term used by Greek philosophers to refer to contentment),¹ but he creates in us the desire to be charitable to others.

In verse 9, Paul cites from Psalm 112 (our Old Testament lesson). *“As it is written, ‘He has distributed freely, he has given to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.’”* In the Psalm, the righteous man demonstrates his righteous status before God through his concern for the poor. Likewise, in the New Covenant, the recipients of God’s grace, respond through charity. In verses 10-11, we see how this divine “multiplier effect” works out in the lives of God’s people. Citing from Isaiah 55:10, Paul writes *“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 to be generous in every way, which*

¹ Keener, BBCNT, 507.

through us will produce thanksgiving to God.” We do not give to get, but as we give, God multiplies the effect of our giving. God gives us everything we have (bread and food—our “sufficiency”). And then, when we give back, God multiplies our giving into what Paul calls a harvest of righteousness. Notice that the promised blessing is not material, but spiritual. We are enriched by God—not “made rich” by God. Grace transforms us, and inclines us to be generous. The result is that God’s people give cheerfully, God multiplies what is given, and he receives the thanksgivings of his people.

In verse 12, Paul ties this charity directly to the diaconal office of the local church. *“For the ministry [diakonia] of this service is not only supplying the needs of the saints but is also overflowing in many thanksgivings to God.”* When the gospel is preached, churches are established, ministers, elders, and deacons are chosen and ordained for service. This service leads to grateful hearts (for the grace of God), which in turn leads the people of God to give thanks for God’s gracious provision as an act of worship. Thus it falls to the deacons to minister to the needs of the saints, and it falls to the members of the church to support the work of the deacons with their gifts, both monetary and in the form of service.

In verses 13-14, Paul concludes, *“By their approval of this service, [the collection of this offering for the Christian poor of Jerusalem] they [the recipients of the charity] will glorify God because of your submission flowing from your confession of the gospel of Christ, and the generosity of your contribution for them and for all others, while they long for you and pray for you, because of the surpassing grace of God upon you.”* This gift will confirm to the Christians in Jerusalem, that God has heard their prayers, and that he has answered them. In response, they will give glory to God and bear witnesses to non-Christians about the mercies of God. The Christians in Corinth and Macedonia will see their gifts multiplied by God, and used by him to relieve the suffering of their brothers and sisters in Jerusalem. They too will give glory to God. In all of this, the grace of God shown to the Corinthians in the cross of Christ and through the power of the Holy Spirit, now generates real and lasting fruit—the suffering saints in Jerusalem will get the help they to desperately need. And all that Paul can say in response is recorded in verse 15. *“Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!”*

What then, do we say, by way of application? There are three aspects of Christian charity spelled out by Paul. First, unlike pagan forms of charity—which are usually motivated by fear of an angry god, guilt from unresolved sin, or from the desire to receive something we desire from God—Christian charity begins with the gospel. God gave his beloved Son to save us from our sins when we were God’s enemies, and had rebelled against him. Because of Christ’s cross, our guilt before God, and any fear of an angry God are not an issue for us. Because we are justified by grace alone through faith alone on account of Christ alone, we are also being sanctified. As this process of sanctification unfolds, God creates charity in our hearts. We begin to love our brothers and sisters and we desire to help and serve them when necessary. Charity flows out of the gospel.

Second, God loves the cheerful giver. We give out of our abundance to those causes which strike our hearts, and about which we are interested. It is good for us to be charitable (with our time and our money) because it helps others who need it, it advances the cause of Jesus Christ in ways we may or may not see, and our charity points watching non-Christians to a gracious and merciful God.

Finally, the goal of Christian charity is not any reward we might receive from God—although God has promised to bless those who give generously. The ultimate goal of Christian charity is that God’s people give thanks to our gracious God. If we can give with this as our motive, God will multiply our giving beyond our wildest expectations. And with Paul, we will look back to the cross of Christ, and the charity which springs from the gospel, and say with grateful hearts, *“Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!”*