

ABST Summer 2018: Lesson 11

August 12, 2018

Charitable Equity for All

Purpose: To identify the reason and ways of living generous lives in Christ.

Scripture Text: 2 Corinthians 8:7-15

Hearing the Word

Many people have cited generous living down through the centuries as one of the hallmarks of Christianity. Paul himself—following Jesus’ lead—has set the bar pretty high for people like us who want to follow Jesus. Thus our purpose statement will help teachers and learners track the tenants of this way of life. Our purpose for this lesson is “to identify the reason and ways of living generous lives in Christ.” A guiding question might be how generosity and faith dovetail.

Immediate Context of our Lesson

Most scholars consider that this section of Paul’s letter, 2 Corinthians, is an appeal for the church to finish the offering that it had begun the year before. The offering is for the Christian church in Jerusalem which is suffering from a fierce famine. Chapter 8 begins Paul’s commendation of the churches in Macedonia. Although we do not know with certainty, the churches there were probably Thessalonica, Philippi, and perhaps Berea. Paul’s praise for these churches was part of Paul’s rhetorical strategy to spur on the work that the Corinthian church had already started. Of course there are many ways to prod people into doing something that they might want to do, but need a slight nudge. Paul’s intent is to say in effect: Look what these folks up the road did. Surely you can match their good efforts and zeal?

A sensible way to divide 2 Corinthians 8 is into three distinct, but interconnected segments. The first segment uses the example of generosity

provided by the Macedonia churches. Paul writes at 2 Corinthians 8:1, “. . . we want to let you know about the grace of God that was given to the churches of Macedonia.” Paul uses the word “grace” as a way to encourage the Corinthian church to acts of giving. Paul uses the word grace here, and in the whole chapter, and it comes from a word from which we get charity (*charis*). This usage of grace for the collection(s) indicates an example of Christ’s commitment that Paul now commends to others. In other words, the Corinthians can be generous to others because Christ has been generous to them.

The second segment of chapter 8, verses 7-15, and our lesson text, is the request itself. This request is an appeal to the faith and generosity of the Corinthian church. The third and last segment, vss. 16-24, is a recommendation—a letter of introduction we might say—for Titus. Titus, as we all know, was a Gentile whom Paul earlier converted. Paul then sends him to Corinth to bring together the money for starving poor in Jerusalem.

The Collection

The churches among the Gentiles gave what we know as “The Collection.” The intent was a monetary gift to the saints in Jerusalem. Paul wrote elsewhere: “Macedonia and Achaia have been happy to make a contribution for the poor among God’s people in Jerusalem” (Romans 15:26). In Acts 13, we read about Paul delivering money to the Jerusalemites accumulated by the Antioch church. We can read Paul’s observation about this gift in Galatians 2:1-10. There Paul refers to the church at Jerusalem and its issues of suffering—especially because of famine. Largely, in Judaism, the needy customarily obtain alms from a specific person, but not on the community to community scale that Paul promoted. Paul’s worldwide vision for the church of Jesus is for not just individuals to care for others, but to tie communities of faith together. He does this by having the collection both given and received.

In the ancient world, scams by swindlers abounded just like they do today. Recently an electrician came to my house and got a good sum of money from me for his job and disappeared—I never saw him again. To provide something of a guarantee, like a human insurance policy, Acts 20:4 relates that Paul “was

accompanied by Sopater, Pyrrhus' son from Beroea, Aristarchus and Secundus from Thessalonica, Gaius from Derbe, Timothy, and Tychicus and Trophimus." These workers with Paul pledged to the contributing churches that their money would get to Jerusalem as intended. Those who sent these church delegates trusted them to get the collection where it needed to go.

The Thread of Paul's Argument

Paul begins our lesson with what we might call the rhetorical ploy of "currying favor." To "curry favor" simply means to try to secure the approval of another person or group by bloated politeness or even flattery in a speech. Good speakers know how to curry favor in order to win an audience to the speaker's side in a speech. In the case of the New Testament the speaking occasion would be a sermon. The apostle curries favor by reminding the Corinthians about how superior they are in many aspects of faith. These aspects Paul outlines: "faith, speech, knowledge, total commitment, and the love we inspired in you." Paul, we remember, also demonstrates this currying of favor in a speech from Acts 17. He tries to secure the favor of an audience that is to a great extent foreign to the audiences Paul usually addresses. Here in Athens, on Mars Hill and among the intellectual elite, Paul says, "People of Athens, I see that you are very religious in every way. As I was walking through town and carefully observing your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: 'To an unknown God.'" (Acts 17:22-23). Yet, a few verses prior to this, we read that Paul "was deeply distressed to find that the city was flooded with idols" (Acts 17:16). The point is that although Paul may not have been happy to see sculptures of idols, he used his observations to his speaking advantage. He praised the Athenians. This is a clear cut case of "currying favor."

The Heart of the Argument

The subject of money in Corinth then was sensitive like I suppose it is now. This is why Paul addresses the matter the way he does. First of all, Paul says what he is writing to them is NOT an order. Instead, he suggests the example of other believer's generosity to the poor church in Jerusalem. Thus he purports to offer them an opportunity "to prove the authenticity of your love." Paul then dubs the

offering as “the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.” This renaming helps the people relate to the larger mission which is at stake—it is not just a collection. It is the spreading God’s grace in Jesus.

Following up that idea of grace is a theological rationale. Paul writes about the example of Jesus: “Although he was rich, he became poor for our sakes, so that you could become rich through his poverty.” Sometimes, as we read this phrase, we might contemplate Jesus’ fiscal poverty. He was born in a stable, had nowhere to lay his head, and “he was despised, and we didn’t think about him” (Isaiah 53:3). Nonetheless, what is a more likely reading about the phrase concerning Jesus’ poverty is that it pertains to the incarnation. As the son of God, Jesus eschews his divinity by taking the form of a human being. Paul sometimes points to Jesus’ incarnation to express theological views. And while it is true that Paul usually writes about “Jesus Christ and . . . him as crucified (1 Corinthians 2:2), here Paul writes of incarnation. He does this also at Philippians 2:7. There Paul reminds the church: Jesus “emptied himself by taking the form of a slave and by becoming like human beings.”

What this means for us today is that Paul puts Jesus forth as an example of extreme generosity. Jesus gave up his divinity and its privileges in order to fully relate to human beings like you and me. He offered himself as a sacrifice for us. The text reads “For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich” (2 Corinthians 8:9). This statement must have been a powerful stimulus for the church in Corinth. Considering what Jesus had done for them, Paul no doubt hopes that the church will follow suit and be generous toward others.

Paul Continues his Claim

After reminding the Corinthian church at verse 8 that he is not giving a command, Paul now writes: “I’m giving you my opinion” here in verse 10. We assume by Paul’s care in handling this communication that some in the church raised a question or two about the offering. Paul’s opinion, therefore, seems to be that they as a church need to finish what they started “last year.” We note that Paul contrasts what they wanted to do last year and an apparent dwindling of resolve

now. They wanted to do the collection “last year,” but now for some reason they are not overly enthusiastic. So assuring them that they need not give more than they can afford, Paul wants them to finish the collection “with as much enthusiasm as you started.” It is interesting that Paul will use a wide variety of rhetorical ploys to encourage the Corinthians to help the Jewish believers in Jerusalem. Paul has praised them, told the church that this is their free choice and not his command, and pointed out that they started out with enthusiasm—now finish “with as much enthusiasm as you started.”

The willingness of the gift counts more than the amount. Paul argument remains logical. He tells them that “your surplus can fill their deficit.” Perhaps then, Paul suggests that someday the Jerusalem church may prove to be helpful to the Corinthian church as he hopes they will be. This idea focuses on the idea of equality. But I suspect there is another issue underlying Paul’s word to them.

Candidly, I think Paul is trying to help not only those in Jerusalem, but also the church in Corinth. Often when a church works on behalf of another person or entity—whether a neighborhood elementary school or building a medical clinic in Liberia—it helps both the givers and the receivers. The giving and receiving often unite believers in fellowship and in surprising ways. Out of their surplus they help those far away and also right in their own community of faith.

One final thought is that Paul had a worldwide vision for the church of Jesus Christ. By having Macedonian and Corinthian Gentile Christians helping the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, part of Ephesians is accomplished: Jesus “broke down the barrier of hatred that divided us” (Ephesians 2:14). The quotation from Exodus 16:18 is in the context of the story of the manna. “The one who gathered more didn’t have too much, and the one who gathered less didn’t have too little.” As unlikely as the human evidence sometimes seems, God will provide for God’s people.

Seeing the Need

Our need to give sometimes outweighs other people’s need to receive. Here is an example of what I mean. We might take the case of someone who wanted to

do good, but was stuck in a certain kind of concept—one that was not optimally helpful.

A young person’s group leader came to me near Christmas one year and said, “My youngsters want to help some poor children, and I thought a pastor might help give us some guidance.” Because she asked, I told her that one of the pressing needs for some of our town’s children were things that might help them in school: notebooks, pencils, and other school supplies. In addition, I told her that many of our children likewise needed coats for the winter and shoes.

She then said, “Well, we are not really interested in those kinds of things. We really want to give the poor children toys and candy. It is Christmas, after all.”

I am not opposed to toys or candy—or even Christmas for that matter. Yet at times when people give to others, they stumble in giving from their desire to give rather than giving to others’ authentic needs. This youth leader wanted to please those who gave more than help those who received. Whether or not she was correct, she had, after all, asked me what I thought.

Any kind of giving can be helpful, but some kinds of giving genuinely helps and perhaps guards the receiver’s dignity.

Living the Faith

Beginning the Session

Our purpose for this lesson is “To identify the reason and ways of living generous lives in Christ.” Write it on the chalk board or dry erase board in your classroom. If that is not an option, then print it on newsprint and make it accessible to all of your class members. This topic about living generous lives is one that is not only important, but can be life giving to some.

Examining the Scripture

Paul has a masterful way of communicating with Corinth. Money is difficult

to talk about with other people. We all know a hard sell when we hear one—and most people don't like it. Yet Christians are different. They (we) follow a Lord who said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive," according to Paul (Acts 20:35). Few people want scammers to hoodwink them. So, at the same time, we accept responsibility to generously share our resources with others as needs occur. In other words, most practicing Christians help strangers if they believe the need is genuine.

Our lesson text helps us understand Paul's basic theological foundation upon which the Corinthians can build their faith and generosity. Paul cites the example of the churches in Macedonia, which are much poorer than in Corinth. These Macedonian churches have "a surplus of rich generosity." Paul goes on to write: "I assure you that they gave what they could afford and even more than they could afford, and they did it voluntarily. They urgently begged us for the privilege of sharing in this service for the saints (2 Corinthians 8:3-4).

Paul attempts to persuade the Corinthians by an argument that the poor, in the case of the Macedonians, were helping the poor. How much more could the Corinthian church do as affluent as they were by comparison? To further bolster his case, Paul writes of Jesus, "You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Although he was rich, he became poor for our sakes, so that you could become rich through his poverty" (2 Corinthians 8:9). Paul adds to these first two arguments the Corinthians' own record as a generous church.

Paul stresses their initial enthusiasm for the collection. They had been the first among the churches to approve of the Jerusalem collection. He urges them to "finish the job as well so that you finish it with as much enthusiasm as you started." Paul does not command but does suggest that the collection is a matter of balanced stewardship. Thus we could say that Paul's argument is that believers' generosity only follows Christ's example of helping others. This is what Christian stewards do!

Although some people fail to give liberally, perhaps nothing tugs at our sentiment quite like the spontaneous outpouring of generous giving. Several events in recent decades give hope about the human impulse toward substantial offering

to people in need. We only need to remember the relief effort surrounding 9/11, the Christmas Day Tsunami of 2004, or Hurricanes Rita and Katrina to be encouraged by the generosity of middle-America. Only God can be the source of such gracious giving. Of course, for stewards generous giving is not a now-and-then activity. Christian stewardship is a daily choice and a way of life. Believers trust that they are stewards, not owners, of God-given resources. People who follow Jesus are equitable with all persons in need.

In Paul's epistle (the day's lesson) we observe how tactful Paul could be when the situation warranted gentle persuasion. Paul and his ministry partner, Titus, have a mission. They receive offerings from their Gentile churches for the poor in the Jerusalem church, primarily featuring Jewish Christians. No doubt Paul believed this would not only create good will, but affirm the Jerusalem Council's decision for Paul to evangelize Gentiles (Acts 15). It was a mission that would moreover connect Jewish and Gentile churches across the Roman Empire. I have no doubt that this notion was part of Paul's overall gospel dream.

Attached to the idea of connecting Jewish and Gentile churches, Paul prompts the Corinthians to remember that life has an odd way of evening things up. The Bible and experience teach us that the measuring vessel we use to give to others is ultimately the same vessel with which life gives to us. "A person will harvest what they plant" (Galatians 6:7). In a deep sense, Paul urges the Corinthian church to match with commitment their earlier eagerness to help others—in this case the Jerusalem church. This Jerusalem church is in every sense the "mother church" for all of Paul's missions.

I knew a man once who gave lavish gifts to his son who lived with his mother. Unfortunately the couple had divorced, and a bitter feeling remained between the parents. Sadly this father, who appeared so generous to the child, failed to pay his child support. He was willing to give "big ticket" items like bicycles and video game systems. Yet he failed to offer support for the more mundane—like food, clothing, and shelter. For this behavior he was taken to court and severely chastised by the judge, who commented that his "self-gratifying gifts to the boy did not feed or care for him in important and fundamental ways." Perhaps Paul makes much the same point.

Christian stewards recognize that special appeal offerings in emergency situations never replace steady, week-in, week-out charity. We often offer our money to the church's ministry in understated ways—the steward's response to life's many needs. As Jesus said, “when you give to the poor, don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing so that you may give to the poor in secret” (Matthew 6:3-4).

Applying Scripture's Truth

In life, hope is often hard to see when we sit in the midst of despair. I have little doubt that this is what the Jerusalem church faced as they endured a long famine. Perhaps they had difficulty in knowing what kind of hope they should look for. A few years ago I rode the Pike's Peak cog-train to the top of this awe inspiring mountain near Colorado Springs, Colorado. Several children rode the train with their parents. It was remarkable to watch children from the flatlands of Kansas encounter sights they had only read about or seen in picture books. Their parents took evident pleasure in pointing out topographical features. All delighted in this firsthand discovery of God's nature.

On the top of Pike's Peak, a father tried to show his son the tree line. This, of course, is a point above which trees do not grow. Below the tree line, lush forests of pines exist, but above the line nothing exists but rocks and prairies of arctic-like tundra. For most adults the tree line is an obvious feature of the landscape. Yet this youngster could not see exactly where the tree line existed. He did not understand what he was to look at—exactly. Looking for hope can sometimes be like this.

His father was patient with him and finally, after about ten minutes, the youngster shouted, “Now I see it, Daddy.” He was quite pleased with himself for making the discovery after looking and looking. Later he proudly pointed out his discovery to other children. He showed his father's patience when he showed the tree line to the other children.

The Gentile churches in Macedonia and Corinth, at Paul's urging, wanted to give hope to those suffering a severe famine in Jerusalem. Yet, at times people of

genuine good will unintentionally give gifts in ways that shame the poor. In God's realm there is a better way. This was part of Paul's plan for the collection—to give the folks in Jerusalem the hope that in the future they could help those who were helping them now. This is what Paul meant when he wrote: "At the present moment, your surplus can fill their deficit so that in the future their surplus can fill your deficit." Helping people retain their dignity while generously giving to them is a hallmark of good stewardship.

Here is a subtle example of what Paul seems to suggest here. I remember reading about a man who had a large bag of aluminum cans. He stopped and offered them to a visibly underprivileged fellow who was, by the way, gathering cans along a highway. He refused the cans saying, "I don't need no charity."

So over the next hill the man with the cans pitched them, several at a time, into the ditch. Later as he returned near the same place, he noted that the man with pride had picked up the cans—every can. In this way the steward gave the gift and the pride persisted intact. You may say just cans, but nonetheless—it was a fine gift justly given.

Optional Activities

Divide your class into smaller segments—say 4-6 persons. Then read them the flowing statement:

The word we use for stewardship is a Greek word from which we derive the English word for "economy."

Stewardship essentially means, "to manage the household." Regrettably, the household that we think of first when we hear the word stewardship is the household of money. Yet, anything that Christians manage is a household. For example, we are Christian stewards over our influence, faith, vote, spiritual life, listening, cooking, love, encouragement, good will, and so on. Indeed anything we manage is a stewardship "household." Clearly our households include our money, but stewardship is also much more than money. It is a very rich and storied Christian concept.

In your group, for about thirty minutes, see how many “stewardship households” you can identify.

Give each group a large piece of newsprint or simply write the answers on a legal pad. After the smaller groups discuss many of the various households we manage as stewards, come back as a whole class and discuss.