

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: AUTHENTIC

(studies in the book of 2 Corinthians)

Fiscal Spirituality

(2 Corinthians 8)

Study #13

Introduction: \$\$\$ and church and Jesus...

On a Sunday morning when we have already heard an update about a food distribution ministry our church provides for people who are hungry, are promoting Dave Ramsey's Financial Peace University course on how to handle money God's way, have received an offering of money from you in support of our church's ministry (both home and abroad), AND are going to be spending the next half hour thinking about money from 2 Corinthians 8, you may wonder if all this church ever talks about is MONEY!

If you are new here, you should know that it's not.

Money is certainly on our minds. News outlets are filled with reports about stock markets and deficits. In our homes we have discussions about credit cards and debt and budgets and 401(k)'s/IRA's.

So, just how important is money?

Well, the apostle Paul said that the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil and can shipwreck souls (1 Timothy 6:9-10) and James says that the lure of money can warp values (James 2:1-4). And Jesus said that the appetite for money will cause some people to fall away from following Him (Matthew 13).

At the same time, it is not that money, in and of itself, is bad. The same Bible that warns us against the misuse of money is also clear that money can be used to all kinds of good ends.

Properly used, money supplies our own needs, alleviates human suffering, resources kingdom of God-sized work on earth, and helps us win friends (It's true! God is not at all opposed to us using money to make friends; He is, though, dead set against us using friends to make money!)

Jesus talked about money - and He talked about it a lot! It wasn't that money was all that important to Him. It's just that He knew it was important to us.

As Christ-followers, we figure that if He talked about money, we should, too. So, today marks the beginning of a couple of Sundays' worth of paying attention to money.

Together, we'll be walking through an extended passage (2 Corinthians 8 and 9) that has more to say about the Christian and his/her money than any other section in the New Testament.

I'm confident that we will all find what Paul has to say about money - in particular, generosity and the blessings that accompany generosity - really, really helpful. (Should I offer a "satisfaction or your money-back" guarantee on these messages...?)

The Bible as story

Now, if you haven't yet spent a lot of time in the Bible, you will discover, as you do, that it is all about "story." In fact, large portions of the Bible are narrative history, telling the stories of how God has worked in the lives of His people.

Other sections, like the one we're looking at today, are not narrative, but are more concerned with teaching.

The thing is, though, that even in the didactic sections of the Bible, there is a back story. And if we don't appreciate the back story, we'll never "get" the point of the teaching.

The back story to 2 Corinthians 8 is at once painful and inspiring, and Paul orients us to the story with a comment about some heroes, some role models when it comes to generosity.

Role Models of Generosity (vv. 1-5)

Generous and Enthusiastic Givers! (vv. 1-4)

A generosity “Exhibit A” (v. 1)

[1] Now, brethren, we wish to make known to you the grace of God which has been given in the churches of Macedonia

Quick. When you hear the phrase, “***the grace of God***” what do you think about? Eternal life? Forgiveness of sins? That’s where my mind goes when I hear, “***the grace of God.***”

I don’t automatically think, “*Money!*” But as will become abundantly clear, money is exactly what he is talking about.

Macedonia was a Roman province, situated north of Achaia (the city of Corinth was located in the province of Achaia). There were churches in Macedonia, including those at Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea.

And here is the situation. A terrible famine had struck Palestine, the land of the Jews, hundreds of miles to the east. Because of the famine - and Paul talked about it in 1 Corinthians, too - many people were suffering. The whole population of Palestine faced hardship because of the famine.

Like everybody else in Palestine, the Christians were suffering because of the famine. But their suffering was compounded by the twist of persecution. They were doubly suffering because of their faith in Jesus.

It was happening in the first century, just as it is happening in many parts of the world today. Christians were denied jobs, lost their jobs, were given less pay for the jobs they did.

As Paul traveled through the Gentile world, he would always go to bat on behalf of the believers in Palestine. He told Christians throughout Asia Minor about the suffering the church was going through back in Israel.

And he always invited the Gentile believers to give money to help meet the material needs in Israel.¹

So, Paul had traveled to Corinth. He led the Corinthians to faith in Jesus, founded the church there, grounded the new believers in truth - and then told them about a part of their Christian family (the Jewish part in Palestine) that needed help.

When he left Corinth, Paul traveled north to Macedonia. While he was in Macedonia, he shared the Jerusalem need with the believers there. And, as he goes on to describe, the Macedonians jumped in with both feet and gave generously and enthusiastically.

A remarkable generosity (vv. 2-3)

[2] that in a great ordeal of affliction their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality.

How remarkable! This isn’t a case of a bunch of Macedonian fat cats helping out their poor Jewish brethren. The Macedonians weren’t “upwardly mobile” but were mired in “***deep poverty.***”

That’s interesting...

What we know from historical records tells us that the region itself was relatively prosperous. There were flourishing agriculture, mining and lumber industries.

So, evidently, the “***poverty***” Paul writes about was more of a Christian phenomenon in Macedonia, probably tied to persecution - just like the Christians in Palestine were suffering.² These Macedonian believers understood poverty only too well - and maybe that is why they wanted to help those who were even worse off than they were.

¹ In fact, collecting money for the poor saints in Jerusalem was undoubtedly one of Paul’s major activities. This collection effort receives only passing mention in Acts (24:17, although see 11:27-30).

² Affliction in the Macedonian churches is attested by several passages in Philippians and Thessalonians. And in fact, “***in a great deal of affliction***” probably means “*while they were being persecuted.*”

I've seen it over and over again. Their personal poverty served to quicken their generosity reflexes.

[3] For I testify that according to their ability, and beyond their ability, they gave of their own accord

Given their own suffering, they did way more than would have been expected of them. We wonder why...

There are a number of factors that will move a person to contribute a lot of money: extortion and blackmail, tyrannical coercion, guilt and shame, and arm-twisting are a few we might think of.

But there was none of that going on here. The Macedonians **wanted** to give to help the Jerusalem Christians.

Eager to give (v. 4)

[4] begging us with much urging for the favor of participation in the support of the saints

I love that! We wouldn't be surprised if it was the person with the need or the person representing the need doing the begging.

I don't think poorly of poor people begging. And I respect the passion of fund-raisers who represent the needs of the poor to others.

But here, it is the people with the resource who are begging. (I have wondered if Paul had been reluctant to invite the Macedonian believers to give to the need back in Israel because they themselves were so dirt poor.)

These folks didn't want to be left out. I picture them on their knees begging for the opportunity to give money to help their fellow Christians. And, finally, Paul relents and tells them, "*Oh, OK, I guess you can give, too!*"

However, the Macedonians understood something that we all need to understand, too. Specifically, **FIRST THINGS FIRST**.

When it came to the ministry of generosity, what "First Things First" meant was that prior to putting money in the offering basket, they had first placed themselves on the altar, committing themselves to the Lord.

Giving Themselves to the Lord, FIRST (v. 5)

[5] and this, not as we had expected, but they first gave themselves to the Lord and to us by the will of God.

Jesus highlighted the importance of "First Things First" throughout His life.

Once, when the Pharisees were trying to trip Him up with a question, they asked Him if God's people should pay tax to Caesar. Jesus' response cut right to the heart of their question. He said,

[19] "Show Me the coin used for the poll-tax." And they brought Him a denarius. [20] And He said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" [21] They said to Him, "Caesar's." Then He said to them, "Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's; and to God the things that are God's."

Money is an important commodity and always has been. However, WE are infinitely more valuable than money.

If Caesar wants the money that has his image and likeness stamped on it, let him have it. But God also wants that which has His image and likeness stamped on it - and that would be you and me.

We who bear the image and likeness of God ultimately belong to Him. And the first step in making any progress on the road to generosity comes when we settle the issue that the Macedonians had settled.

First things first: Who's on first in your life?

This is where any discussion about giving must begin. Every one of us needs to wrestle with the question of ultimate allegiance prior to considering offering our material assets.

Jesus addressed the issue with airtight reasoning. He said that it is right to give ourselves and our things to God and His purposes because, having His image stamped on us, WE ARE ALREADY HIS.

The Macedonians gave more generously than Paul could have hoped for because they started at the right place, not with their pocketbooks, but with their hearts.

There is a danger in not coming to grips with “who’s on first” in our lives. And that danger is that we will end up either not giving or giving for all the wrong reasons.

OK. Back to our passage.

Paul has presented the Macedonians as “Exhibit A” when it comes to generosity. He returns to the Corinthians and urges generosity from them, too.

The Call to Generosity (vv. 6-9)

General Spirituality & Generosity (vv. 6-8)

[6] So we urged Titus that as he had previously made a beginning, so he would also complete in you this gracious work as well. [7] But just as you abound in everything, in faith and utterance and knowledge and in all earnestness and in the love we inspired in you, see that you abound in this gracious work also. [8] I am not speaking this as a command³, but as proving through the earnestness of others the sincerity of your love also.

So...

- Yes, God has given us great gifts/spiritual blessings... and
- Yes, we are to grow in godly attitudes... and
- Yes, we are to exercise the gifts of the Spirit... and
- Yes, we are to manifest the fruit of the Spirit... and
YES, we are to grow strong when it comes to giving, too!

³ Interesting thought - could Paul have issued a command? Did apostolic authority extend to that level?

According to Paul, growing as generous givers, becoming people who have a loose grip on our money, being the kind of people who always have their eye out for needs they can meet, is just part and parcel of growing as a Christian.

It just makes sense to be a giver!

But, of all the ammunition, of all the arguments Paul might bring to the table to convince the Corinthians - or us - of the need for generosity, the ultimate motivation comes from a consideration of Jesus’ generosity toward us. He takes us back to the old, old story.

Having Received, We Now GIVE! (v. 9)

[9] For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich.

There are several places in the Gospels where we are reminded of Jesus’ riches. In John 17 (where He prays what we refer to as “The High Priestly Prayer), for instance, the Lord mentions the glory He had when He had lived in Heaven with His Father through all eternity past.

Then and there, He owned everything. But, everything changed when He came to earth.

Over and over again in the Gospels we read of Jesus having to borrow things. Some of His clothing was borrowed. He had to borrow a coin to make a point, first in a miracle and then in a parable.

He borrowed a donkey to make a Kingly entrance into Jerusalem and then borrowed an Upper Room for a Passover celebration with His disciples. After He died the death of absolute poverty through crucifixion, His body was laid in a borrowed tomb.

He became poor for you and me - that we might become rich in the things that really matter.

And we are each to jump at the chance to be givers for the simple reason that, for our sake, that’s what Jesus did.

Summary: Thus far, Paul has told us that participation in the ministry of generosity is called for because:

- (1). There are fellow Christians in real need - so help them!
- (2). Other Christians have given sacrificially to meet needs - so join them;
- (3). Jesus was generous to you - so imitate Him!

Now, we might hear all of this and be thoroughly convinced that giving is exactly what we should do, even that it is what we want to do.

If so, great! But, Paul isn't finished.

All he has done so far has been to lay out the reality that there are needs and that it is a great thing for you and me to participate in meeting those Kingdom needs with the resources He's provided us.

He goes on from here to lay out crucial truths that will to guide us in the right direction as we aim to grow in becoming generous people.

We find the first of three essentials in verses ten and eleven.

Generosity Essentials (vv. 10-15)

#1: FOLLOW-THROUGH (Finish What You Start; vv. 10-11)

[10] I give my opinion in this matter, for this is to your advantage, who were the first to begin a year ago not only to do this, but also to desire to do it. [11] But now finish doing it also; so that just as there was the readiness to desire it, so there may be also the completion of it by your ability.

Here Paul speaks to the importance of follow-through. It is critical in golf and field goal kicking. It's important in giving, too.

Evidently, the Corinthians had responded with great enthusiasm when Titus first told them about the Jerusalem need. And they had the means to make a real difference in the situation back in Palestine.

For one thing, Corinth had not experienced the poverty that comes with persecution like the Christians had up in Macedonia. For another thing, Achaia (the region - like a state - in which Corinth was located) was a wealthier area than Macedonia anyway.

So, the Corinthians had made plans to start collecting for the offering. There had been no arm-twisting.

And they had done well to desire to give. In fact, Paul tells us here that they were the first of all the churches to begin to be fixin' to start getting ready to commence to give.

But, somehow, the poverty-stricken Macedonians had outstripped the Corinthians in ACTUAL giving. They followed through and the Corinthians didn't.

Back in his first letter, Paul had urged a weekly collection of funds (see Corinthians 16:2). But to this point no honest to goodness collection had - even yet - been taken up.

They had allowed the enterprise to be interrupted by, well, you name it - busy schedules, not getting around to it, pressing business, economic uncertainty, the kids' sports practices!⁴

When you are stirred to give toward a need - be it a special project, a mission, an individual, or an on-going need - that stirring is good.

But the blessing comes when you follow through on what your heart is directing you to do with respect to giving.

So, the first essential when it comes to giving is - finish what you start. Follow through.

The second essential is equally simple: Give (and promise to give) based on what you have, not based on what you don't have.

#2: FAITH: Give What You Have (v. 12)

[12] For if the readiness is present, it is acceptable according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have.

⁴ Also, see the parable Jesus told in Matthew 21:28-31. Intentions are nothing without follow through.

It has been suggested by some Bible scholars that Paul's words here are addressing a particular Corinthian practice that had caused a problem.

If these scholars are correct, then this Corinthian practice has been duplicated many, many times through the centuries, often with equally problematic results.

What seems to have happened was that the Corinthians had promised that they would give toward the Jerusalem project when they had first heard about the need. But when the time came for the collecting, they didn't have the money.

And the reason they didn't have the money at the collection time may well have been that they didn't have the money when they made the promise in the first place.

They pledged to give on the basis of what they HOPED to have, not on what they ACTUALLY had. That is a risky practice.

The problem with this kind of pledging is that nowhere in Scripture do we find anything like a promise from God that He will supply what we want to give.

Of course, the Lord does sometimes provide in super-gracious ways so that we can give way more than we would normally be able to give toward some great need.

But, as He has not pledged to do that on a routine basis, so it is unwise for us to make a pledge based on what we HOPE to have.

Now, some people may take exception to what I'm saying here and accuse me (and Paul?) of a lack of faith. Well, as non-defensively as I can, let me just say that I'm all about giving in faith, trusting God as we give, and giving faithfully!

And here's one of the ways that I might picture FAITH working its way in to a discussion of giving.

Let's consider a concrete example.

Suppose you decide, *"I want to give \$1,000 toward one of Northwest's missionaries on March 1st of this year."* Or, *"I want to give \$1,000 toward Project C.U.R.B. Appeal by March 1st."* Or, *"I want to give \$1,000 to the Agape Pregnancy Care Center by March 1st."* Or *"I want to bless my struggling friend with \$1,000 by March 1st."*

OK. Great ambition. Good desiring. You set the money aside, and then, come March 1st, you write the check and give the money.

But what if you don't have the money at the time you make the pledge? Well, you've got a problem, 'cuz it's already January 30th. Faith had better get to work!

So, you approach your boss and ask for extra hours or additional assignments to make more money. You sell things to build toward that \$1,000. You hire out to mow lawns, wash cars, baby-sit, or do odd jobs around your neighborhood.

And if, on March 1st, you have collected \$948 toward your desired goal and you have an opportunity to bring it \$1,000 by selling one more item - an item that means a lot to you - well, you sell that item. That, my brothers and sisters, is FAITH!

A promise is only a true FAITH-promise if, when the time comes to give the amount promised, I give it regardless of how it affects my standard of living.

Paul says that it is not wise (actually, he says that it is not acceptable) to pledge what we don't have. A promise to give is acceptable only on the basis of what a person has, not what he or she HOPES to have.

The final "stewardship" essential Paul lists in this passage is found in verses 13-15.

#3: Fellowship: All in This Together (vv. 13-15)

In any church - and in the Body of Christ, worldwide - there will be people at different points on the economic scale. There will be people of means, and there will be others who struggle, and there will be people right smack dab in the middle.

That kind of diversity (as well as other kinds of diversity) is a very good thing. And when it comes to the matter of giving, Paul would say two things, based on the reality of that beautiful diversity.

We'll first look at verse 15, and watch the point Paul makes by way of a quote from the Old Testament.

Equal sacrifice from all

[15] as it is written, "HE WHO gathered MUCH DID NOT HAVE TOO MUCH, AND HE WHO gathered LITTLE HAD NO LACK.

The quote (v. 15) is from Exodus 16, where Moses describes the collection of manna by the Israelites in the wilderness. It was a miraculous collecting in that there was an adequate amount of manna for everyone.

By God's gracious provision, as the people collected manna no one lacked what was needed and no one had an excess. Here in 2 Corinthians, Paul uses that story to make the point that there is to be equality of response spread out through the church to any appeal to need.

Not that there should be equal giving from all (after all, different families collected different amounts of manna), but that there should be equal sacrifice from all to meet pressing needs in Jesus' Name.

What a picture!

In the first century context that would have meant that wealthy Corinthians and poverty-stricken Macedonians all gave so that starving, persecuted Christians in Palestine were taken care of.

Today, it will mean that each one here at Northwest - those who are well off and those who are struggling - all contribute to see that the General Fund budget is met, the Food Pantry is abundantly supplied, the Benevolence Fund is resourced, and missionaries are supported.

It will mean that believers from many churches support the ministry of Wycliffe Bible Translators and Youth for Christ and Voice of the Martyrs so that the work of these and other organizations go forward.

In the church, everyone has a stake in seeing that needs are met and everyone wants to see the Gospel going forward. So, everyone gives.

But Paul's words here also say something to those who have an "abundance."

The purpose of abundance

[13] For this is not for the ease of others and for your affliction, but by way of equality - [14] at this present time your abundance being a supply for their need, so that their abundance also may become a supply for your need, that there may be equality;

Many, if not most of us in the US, have what the Bible would call "an abundance." We have more than we need to live (Did you eat a meal at a restaurant in the past six weeks? Do you have a television? Do you own a car?) and we have a whole lot of "stuff" when compared to many, many people in the world.

Paul says that we who believe in Jesus are to view our abundance through a uniquely Jesus-shaped lens.

In our culture, we all know what to do when we get a raise, a promotion with pay, or a windfall of any sort. We buy. We upgrade. We stimulate the economy. It's the American way.

However, it's not necessarily the Jesus way. God's Word tells us that our abundance does not necessarily mean that we are supposed to go out and "up" our standard of living. Our abundance gives us an opportunity to provide for someone else's lack, whether that lack be food/clothing/shelter or a lack of Jesus. What a radical concept!

Getting involved in the ministry of generosity is an honor and a privilege because it allows us to track in Jesus' footsteps, the One who, being rich, became poor so that we, through His poverty, might become rich.