

“A Fair Balance”

2 Corinthians 8:7-15

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I want to turn our attention to the passage from 2 Corinthians that we heard a few minutes ago. This is a rich passage about riches and poverty. It is about generosity, about grace, about commitment, about the gospel of Jesus at work in the world to make a tangible difference in the lives of real people. It is a passage that may not be well known to many of you. Yet there is much treasure here.

Paul begins: “Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking.” Paul is commending the Christians in Corinth first for their *faith* in Christ; second, for their *speech*, literally their “word,” the truths that they are speaking about Jesus; third, for their *knowledge*, their understanding of the mysteries of the Gospel; fourth, for their *utmost eagerness*, the quick desire on their part to be devoted to Jesus; and fifth, for the deep affection Paul feels for them on account of their faithfulness. So the Corinthians have *five things going for them*, five reasons why Paul says they are “excelling” in their Christian walk of faith. But there is one more area Paul wishes that they would excel in, one area where evidently he feels that they are currently *not* excelling. He calls it “this generous undertaking.”

What is he referring to? What is the “generous undertaking” that the Corinthians are not (yet) excelling in? To figure that out, we need to back up a few verses, to the beginning of the chapter. “We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia.” Macedonia is what we would now call northern Greece; it is the region that contained the cities of Philippi and Thessalonica, and the churches in those cities. So Paul wants to tell the Christians in Corinth about what is going on in the churches in Philippi and Thessalonica. He says: “during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.” Those Christians were going through a very rough time – probably stiff opposition from the Jews in those areas, who thought the Christians were perverting their faith. Those Christians were also very poor. Yet, despite these hardships, they were joyful, and were generously giving to a fund to help the impoverished Christians in Jerusalem, many hundreds of miles away. Paul says: “they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints.” As Paul traveled, strengthening established churches and creating new ones, he would routinely tell them of the plight of the Christians in the city where the gospel was born, Christians who had suffered a great deal of hardship and were extremely poor. It was Paul’s intent to raise a large sum of money to bring back to the mother church in Jerusalem. The Christians in Philippi and Thessalonica were giving generously to that fund, *despite* their own struggles and lack of wealth. They were, in Paul’s mind, a model of Christian generosity.

So, to the Christians in Corinth, he says this: “I do not say this as a command, but I am testing

the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others.” That is, he is not telling them they *have* to give; he is not issuing some sort of apostolic *edict* that would *mandate* that they give money to the fund. But he is definitely applying some pressure. He’s holding up the contributions from the Christians in Philippi and Thessalonica as an example for the Christians in Corinth to follow. He’s basically asking them: *Do you love Jesus as much as those Christians do? If so – then prove it.*

But, not content to stop there, he moves on to a *second* tactic that he hopes will elicit a faithful response from the Corinthians. He says: “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.” He shifts the topic from what *other* Christians are doing, to what *Jesus himself* did. What did Jesus do? Jesus gave up the *richness* that he had had. As the biblical commentator Matthew Henry put it so beautifully, Jesus was, “equal in power and glory with the Father, rich in all the glory and blessedness of the upper world.” Yet Jesus gave all that up in becoming human, choosing *our* salvation over his *own* condition. In Henry’s words, Jesus “not only did become man for us, but he became poor also. He was born in poor circumstances, lived a poor life, and died in poverty; and this was for our sakes, that we thereby might be made rich, rich in the love and favour of God, rich in the blessings and promises of the new covenant, rich in the hopes of eternal life, being heirs of the kingdom.” Or, to borrow Paul’s own words from his letter to the Philippians, Jesus “who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.” Paul describes this as Christ’s “generous act ... that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.”

So, first Paul applies a bit of pressure on the Christians in Corinth to contribute to the fund. Next, he points to the generosity of Christ himself. Then, finally, he appeals to their own intentions: “it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something—now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means.” You see, this is not the first time Paul has raised this subject with the Corinthians; a whole year before he wrote this letter, they had committed themselves to raising money to give to the mother church. Back in Paul’s *first* letter to the Corinthians, he had given them some clear guidance for how they should go about this: “On the first day of every week, each of you is to put aside and save whatever extra you earn, so that collections need not be taken when I come. And when I arrive, I will send any whom you approve with letters to take your gift to Jerusalem.” So the Corinthians have been at this for a whole year now – or, at least, they should have been. Paul evidently has received word that there is not much money in the fund, or that collections aren’t happening every week as he had envisioned. The Christians in Corinth had agreed to take up the collection; indeed, they had even asked Paul about how best to do it – that’s why he gives that advice in 1 Corinthians – but evidently they have failed to be diligent in their efforts to raise the money; they have not followed through on what they had promised.

It’s clear, in Paul’s mind, that their failure to raise the money isn’t because they aren’t *able*. It seems to be because they haven’t been *eager*. He says: “if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have.” The Corinthians may or may not have a lot of money. In Paul’s mind, that’s beside the point. The question is, are they actually *eager* to help their fellow sisters and brothers? Is this a ministry they *care* about? For when people truly *care* about a ministry, about an effort, about a cause, *they will give*, even if it causes them some hardship. Many of you gave *very generously* to our two recent capital campaigns, to pay for our recent renovation,

even if, in some cases, that was *considerably* more than you usually give to charity. But you gave it because you truly *cared*; you *wanted* this project to succeed. And succeed it did, paying off our twenty-year mortgage in the space of six short years. *That's* the kind of generosity and commitment Paul wants to see from the Corinthians. *That's* the kind of generosity and commitment he felt was lacking.

"I do not mean," he says to the Corinthians, "that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance." Notice that he twice uses the phrase "*a fair balance*" to describe what he is aiming at. He wholeheartedly does not believe that there should be great disparities in wealth between different Christian churches, or within the Christian community. Remember the practice of the early church in Jerusalem, that everyone would sell all their goods, donate the proceeds to the church, and the church leaders would redistribute the wealth among the Christian believers, according to their need. Paul is engaging in something similar here, encouraging the Christians in these Greco-Roman cities to give to the poor. By and large, they *were* more well-off than the Christians of Jewish background in Jerusalem. Paul firmly believed that there should not be great disparities of wealth between Christians, and that it should be considered a *joy* for those of greater economic means to give financial aid and support to those less fortunate. There should be, to use his words, "*a fair balance.*" Those who have an abundance *should give* to those in need.

He finds support for his view in the pages of scripture: "As it is written, 'The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little.'" That's a quotation from Exodus 16:18, from when the Israelites had just crossed the Red Sea and entered the wilderness, and God was providing them manna to eat. Each morning, the Israelites would gather the manna. Some would gather more, and others would gather less, according to the needs of their individual families. Larger families obviously needed more; smaller families obviously needed less. The manna would be measured to make sure that each family was getting their fair share – no more, and no less. "The one who had much did not have *too* much, and the one who had little did not have *too* little." A fair balance.

Now there are many implications to all of this, as I'm sure you all can already see. There's the matter of *attitude* toward charitable giving – whether it is done *eagerly*, or under *compulsion*. There's the matter of *redistributing wealth* among all the members of the Christian community – not just within local congregations, but also across the nation and the world, to ensure there is a fair balance. There's the matter of *honoring commitments* you have made, and the matter of *regularly setting aside a portion of your income* to give to the needs of the saints. I know that many of you are generous and cheerful givers; that has been very evident as recent years, as Sheren routinely reports to the Finance Committee that somebody has anonymously given money for this purpose or that. Gifts like that have been, and continue to be, a huge blessing. But perhaps there are others who, like the Christians in Corinth, need a little more *encouragement*, or a few *reminders* that generosity is an essential part of the Christian faith. If you're someone who needs a bit of *encouragement*, or some *reminders*, well, this passage is for you.

Paul's efforts to persuade the Corinthians to give generously appear to have been successful. In his letter to the Romans – which he wrote later on – he says this: "I am going to Jerusalem in a ministry to the saints; for Macedonia *and Achaia* have been pleased to share their resources with the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. They were pleased to do this." Achaia is the province where the city of Corinth was. Paul makes it clear that the Corinthians *came through*, in the end, after all.