

2 Corinthians 8: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] 2 Corinthians chapter 8 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.

For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favour 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.

Accordingly we urge Titus that as he had started, so he should complete among you this act of grace. 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.

I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine. 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.

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. 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.

[1 : 19] For if the readiness is there, it is acceptable according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have. 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.

As it is written, whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack. But thanks be to God, who put into the heart of Titus the same earnest care I have for you.

For he not only accepted our appeal, but being himself very earnest, he is going to you of his own accord. With him we are sending the brother who is famous among all the churches for his preaching of the gospel.

And not only that, but he has been appointed by the churches to travel with us, as we carry out this act of grace that is being ministered by us, for the glory of the Lord himself, and to show our good will.

We take this course so that no one should blame us about the generous gift that is being administered by us. For we aim at what is honourable, not only in the Lord's sight, but also in the sight of man.

[2 : 24] And with them we are sending our brother whom we have often tested and found earnest in many matters, but who is now more earnest than ever because of his great confidence in you. As for Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker for your benefit.

And as for our brothers, they are messengers of the churches, the glory of Christ. So give proof before the churches of your love, and of our boasting about you to these men. 2 Corinthians chapter 8 and the chapter that follows concern the collection for the Christians in Jerusalem.

Paul has already spoken of this collection back in 1 Corinthians chapter 16 verses 1 to 4. Now concerning the collection for the saints, As I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do.

On the first day of every week each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come. And when I arrive I will send those whom you accredit by letter to carry your gift to Jerusalem.

If it seems advisable that I should go also, they will accompany me. Paul is organising a symbolic and a much needed gift from various Gentile churches to the churches in Judea.

[3 : 30] Titus has experienced considerable success among the Macedonian churches, but the response from the Corinthians has been somewhat less enthusiastic. Paul presents the Macedonians as examples to the Corinthians in this endeavour.

Now Paul is sending Titus back to the Corinthians, hoping to encourage them in the matter of the collection. When we read a passage like this we may wonder what it has to do with what has gone before in the letter.

Paul Sampley has some helpful observations about thematic connections. Paul has been emphasising his ministry, but now speaks of a ministry that the Corinthians can exercise as a sort of a return.

The Corinthians can participate in the ministry of reconciliation that Paul has spoken of by giving to the Jewish Christians in such a manner. The theme of abundance and the overflowing of abundance has been mentioned by Paul in a few contexts already, in chapter 1 verse 5, in chapter 3 verse 9, in chapter 4 verse 15.

It seems to be a characteristic feature of the gospel, and now he calls for the Corinthians to express this in their giving. He has spoken of the Corinthian zeal and earnestness, as reported by Titus, and now he calls for those traits to be expressed in the collection.

[4 : 40] The theme of glory has been prominent to this point in the letter, and now he speaks of the collection as something that will bring glory to Christ. Finally, the multifaceted theme of grace and gift pervades this chapter, as it has the rest of the letter.

The collection is a very concrete expression of grace in action. Our Lord preached a message of good news to the poor, yet for many of his followers today the gospel message and Christian concern for the poor stand in uncertain and uneasy relation.

Although few would deny that Christians have no special duty to the poor, maintaining this duty in the context of a full-bodied Christian faith has proven surprisingly challenging. For some, the Christian message that summons people to the works of mercy can be reduced to a vanishing mediator for a generic message of social justice and welfare.

Christ's teaching and example may be invoked to underwrite and inspire the moral fervency of a secularised social activism. Yet in the final analysis, Christ may prove dispensable for it.

This is typically coupled with a shift from Christ to the government as the agent that must affect the awaited kingdom's advent, and from the church to secular society as its focal community.

[5 : 54] Christ ceases to be set forth as the king of the coming kingdom, the one to whom every knee must bow. He is diminished in stature to the level of a mere moral teacher, exemplar, and vocal advocate for social justice.

A smile of universal benevolence lingers, as, like the Cheshire cat, Christ himself gradually disappears. In other quarters, concerns about the wayward trajectory of a social gospel, coupled with wariness about the overemphasis upon works among Protestants, have led many conservative Christians theologically to minimise the importance of Christian charity.

Lest it come to displace Christ and his centrality, Christian charity must be handled as a matter of secondary, peripheral, or even extraneous concern. Yet when we read passages such as 2 Corinthians chapter 8 and 9, a vision of Christian practice emerges for which the works of mercy operate in a close and inseparable relation with the specific claims of the Christian gospel.

The modern reader of the Pauline epistles, who hasn't paid sufficient attention to the book of Acts, can easily fall into the trap of regarding the Apostle Paul principally as a thinker, whose travels, church planting, and charitable work were largely incidental to his theological labours and thought.

That the Pauline corpus consists of occasional letters to particular parties is also often a fact passed over without reflection. Yet both a careful reading of the epistles and of the book of Acts reveals that the various dimensions of the Apostle Paul's labours were firmly bound up together.

[7 : 28] As the Apostle to the Gentiles, one of Paul's chief goals was to establish the union of Jewish and Gentile Christians in a single household, functioning according to a single economy of grace.

His theological work consistently undergirds and propels his practical labours. Collecting for the poor, in particular the poor in Jerusalem, was one of the things that Paul was charged to do by the lead apostles, the pillars of the church, in Jerusalem in Galatians chapter 2 verses 7 to 10.

On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised, for he who worked through Peter for his apostolic ministry to the circumcised worked also through me for mine to the Gentiles, and when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the circumcised.

Only they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do. Whether in letter writing, travelling and missionary work, dispatching fellow workers to various parts of the church, or in the raising of charitable funds for Christians in Jerusalem, the Apostle Paul tirelessly laboured to forge a unified economy and communication network between churches across the Roman Empire.

In the circulation of Pauline epistles, for instance, specific churches passed on both the revelation given to them and their examples to other churches, borne by messengers who would serve the receiving church in the name of the sending church and enjoy hospitality in return.

[9 : 02] You should also notice the way that Paul will consistently refer to other churches as examples to the churches to whom he is writing. Here it is the example of the Macedonian Christians that Paul brings forward for the Corinthians to follow.

As Paul encourages the Corinthian Christians in their raising of a financial gift for the Christians in Jerusalem, he does what he does in places such as Romans chapter 15, verses 25 to 27.

He presents a rich, theological and rhetorically shrewd rationale for his charitable work. He mobilises key themes of his epistles to encourage those receiving them to these endeavours.

Verse 7 exhibits some of this as Paul frames the gift for the Jerusalem Christians in terms of the grace that the Corinthians have themselves received, especially striking as the way that Paul presents the giving that he is calling the Corinthians to as simultaneously a divine gift that he is desiring to see them abound in, a gift of which the Macedonian churches are exemplary recipients, which he emphasises at the start of the chapter in verses 1 and 2.

In their practice of liberality, the Corinthians will receive the divine gift of giving. Here we see a logic that is more fully developed in the chapter that follows, where Paul speaks of God's abounding gift of his grace as that which makes possible our own liberality, by giving us to participate in his own giving.

[10 : 27] We should bear in mind here the way that the gifts of the Spirit in Pauline theology function as divine gifts by which the members of Christ's body are given to represent and participate in God's gift of the Holy Spirit to the whole.

In such a manner, the liberal giver is the one who most fully receives. This paradox is characteristically Pauline, and perhaps especially fitting in the book of 2 Corinthians, within which a power in weakness paradox is foregrounded in later chapters.

Paul proceeds to speak of Christ, who was rich, becoming poor, so that through his poverty we might become rich. Verse 9. As is often the case, Paul frames Christian practice both in terms of the example of Christ, and then also in terms of the example presented by other Christians that we should follow.

The relationship between poverty and riches in this statement also has elements of paradox, akin to those of James chapter 1 verses 9 to 10. Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away.

The heavenly riches that we have been given are discovered through a spiritual orientation that most readily grows in the soil of material poverty, what Oliver O'Donovan terms a dependence upon God and openness to his kingdom.

[11 : 48] God's riches are received in spiritual poverty, something which the puffed-up Corinthians often fail to exhibit. Paul's purposeful avoidance of command in favour of exhortation, as we see in verse 8, is also both typical and noteworthy.

For the Corinthians' act of giving to have its appropriate character, it must be done by their own volition, not under any compulsion or burdensome obligation. Paul is pointedly not imposing a tax, but is rather encouraging the Corinthians to come into the fuller possession of a gift and to follow the example of Christ, so that the fruitfulness of their gratitude and the abundance of their giving will redound to God's own glory.

Paul then seeks to summon the Corinthians into the freedom of the abundant gift of Christ, in the full receipt of which they would overflow in joyful giving. As elsewhere, Paul's conviction that the Spirit fulfills the law in the hearts of Christians leads him to adopt a rhetoric of persuasion and exhortation, appealing to the will liberated by the Spirit, for which the paths of the law's fulfilment will be the paths of freedom.

The notion of equality in verse 14 should probably be read against a Greek background, where it was connected both with accounts of friendship and with politics. In the first place, in ministering to the needs of the Judean Christians, the Corinthians would be expressing the reality of the fellowship of the saints, as we see in verse 4.

In the second place, the ministering of the Gentile Christians to Jewish Christians in Jerusalem would be a striking political gesture, of which L.L. Wellborn observes, the politically superior inhabitants of a Roman colony must demonstrate their submission to conquered provincials in Jerusalem in order to achieve equality.

[13 : 35] The equality advocated for here, as in the case of the oneness spoken of in Galatians chapter 3 verse 28, there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Shouldn't be confused for some generalised egalitarian commitment on Paul's part. It is an equality grounded firmly in the event of Christ's action and in the new reality of the Church, not in some liberal convictions that Paul holds about human persons and societies as such.

The fact that the Jerusalem Christians are to be the recipients of the gift is not insignificant either. The equality that Paul calls for relates to the reciprocity described in Romans chapter 15 verses 25 to 27.

At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints. For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem, for they were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them.

For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings. In the giving of such gifts, the bond between Jews and Gentiles in the Church and in the Gospel would be strengthened and a fellowship galvanised through the reciprocal ministry of the gifts of Christ.

[14 : 52] This giving is a decidedly theological act then. Paul's reference to Exodus 16 is arresting in this context for many reasons. Exodus chapter 16 verse 18 reads, This verse comes from the account of God's providential gift of manna to the children of Israel during the Exodus, and Paul's use of it in this context is quite remarkable.

Our initial impression might be that Paul's use of the verse is somewhat at odds with its original context. In Exodus, the verse relates to the perfect sufficiency of God's provision for the needs of each of the Israelite families.

However, in 2 Corinthians chapter 8, Paul uses the same verse to bolster his appeal to the Corinthians, the ones who have much, to give to the Jerusalem Christians, the ones who have little.

The equality is not immediately established in the divine act of provision itself, but will only be realised through the participation of the Corinthians in ministering to the Jewish Christians.

This, however, fits with the greater themes of these chapters. The gift and provision of God is to be ministered and enjoyed through and in the gifts of his people to each other.

[16 : 11] The allusion to the gift of the manna might also excite other connections in the minds of the heroes of this passage. It relates the early Christian church to the Exodus generation, and implicitly situates them within the Messianic age, as well-born suggests.

As they are being led out of the Egypt of sin and death by Christ, they are being fed by him. A further possible connection would be to the celebration of the supper. The Christians sharing in the bread of the supper corresponded with the Israelites feeding on the manna.

However, while the bread of the manna was gathered in an equal manna, the bread of the supper is to be distributed in an equal manna. By means of the manna allusion, Paul may subtly conceptually relate the supper to the distribution of resources between Christians in the ministry of gifts.

Note also the references to communion, koinonia, in verse 4. Perhaps there is some indication here that for Paul, the supper must be validated in the practice of the works of mercy and ministry in the body of Christ.

