



## *“Practicing Generosity”*

1 Chronicles 29:1-3, 6, 10-16; 2 Corinthians 8:1-10; Mark 12:41-44

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**March 22, 2009**

Fourth Sunday in Lent

The Apostle Paul had a problem. Conflict between Jewish Christianity and the Gentile churches was escalating. In part the problem was of Paul’s own making. He was the missionary who took early Christianity out of its Jewish cradle and introduced the gospel to the Gentile world. Paul’s success, along with the rapid growth of Gentile Christianity, created tension back home in Jerusalem.

Paul took responsibility for the schism and determined to do something about it. Famine was severe in Judea, home of Jewish Christianity, and Paul suspected that Jewish need could be Gentile opportunity. He proposed a capital fund drive among the churches in Macedonia and Greece. He would personally take the funds raised home to Judea as a gesture of love from the Gentile churches. After all, he told the Gentile Christians, Judaism gave you Christ and the gospel of God, the least you can do is give sacrificially to the mother church in Jerusalem. So, he wrote famously, “on the first day of the week, lay aside a portion of what God has given you,” (1 Corinthians 16:1) and I will collect it on my next trip through town.

Paul was convinced this significant gesture would begin to heal the widening breach in early Christianity. The Gentile churches heartily agreed. They gave generously. The churches in Macedonia, themselves suffering poverty, begged Paul to let them give to the project and they gave sacrificially.

All the pledge cards were in and the money collected – except for the church in Corinth.

It probably wasn’t a surprise to Paul. The church at Corinth was a problem church and had been from the beginning. The congregation was divided into competing special interest groups, and the leaders of the church opposed Paul’s instructions at every opportunity. Paul made several trips to Corinth to attempt reconciliation. Things got worse. He wrote more than one letter trying to correct things, but that didn’t work either.

Finally, he wrote them one last time. He begged them to reconcile with each other and himself. And he asked them one last time to join the great offering for the Jewish Christians.

Paul’s plea, 2 Corinthians 7-9, is the longest, most sustained argument for Christian generosity in the Bible, and it is well worth our attention.

We don’t know if the church at Corinth participated in the project. We do know Paul’s great gesture for reconciliation failed. Paul’s arrival in Jerusalem was tragically misunderstood. The misunderstanding steamrolled into Paul’s arrest, imprisonment, a series of appeals, and his eventual execution in Rome, a victim of the mad Emperor Nero.

The good news in that bad news is Paul’s fascinating and convincing argument for Christian financial stewardship, an argument seldom used in the stewardship drives of Christian churches. The issue is important for reasons greater than fundraising in

churches. Generosity, which is the real issue in stewardship, is part of Christian spirituality. God wants all of us to get hold of our hearts and our finances and do the right thing.

Generosity is a practice of faith with roots deep in Judaism and with rich fruit in the Christian tradition. Generosity is a Christian “non-negotiable.” God’s work on earth depends on it, and the depth and width of our spirituality depends on it as well. Generosity is an inherent part of Christian faith. The work of God depends on our generosity, and our spiritual growth is shaped by our generosity.

The most interesting characteristic of Paul’s argument for Christian generosity is what he doesn’t say. He doesn’t use a variety of arguments at his disposal, techniques used rather effectively by stewardship committees and capital fund drives for centuries.

For example, Paul doesn’t make his case by describing the hardships of poverty being experienced in Judea. He could have, but he doesn’t.

It’s a legitimate and effective argument. The Bible argues repeatedly that God is very much against poverty and hunger and that the people of God are responsible for alleviating poverty. The gospel lesson for today is a case in point. Jesus commended the widow for putting money in the poor box at the Temple. Money collected in the poor box fed and housed the poor.

There is no doubt that the Jerusalem church was poor and the famine was creating hunger. But Paul doesn’t use the hungry children of Judea as an appeal for Corinthian money. He could have. Few techniques are more effective in fundraising than pictures of hungry children. Every relief organization in the world knows that is a primary fundraising tool.

In fact, Paul argues that no one should ever give out of a sense of obligation – or out of guilt. Such motives are not large enough for Christian stewardship.

Nor does Paul offer a soaring vision of a healed church. Every fundraiser in the church knows that Christians give to “grand ideas whose time has come.” The grander the idea and the more tangible we make it the more money people give. Visionaries raise money by spinning vision.

I’ve done it. Most pastors do it from time to time. I’ve been involved in a number of capital fund campaigns and my job is to be the vision caster for the projects. I can do it, and I’ve done it well.

When we were in Boston, we had the once-in-a-century opportunity to purchase the two buildings next door to the church. They were the corporate headquarters of Houghton-Mifflin Publishing, and they were moving to new quarters.

We bought the buildings at the bottom of a commercial real estate slump for a bargain basement price. Some people in the congregation thought the purchase was either imprudent or impractical. The leadership thought otherwise.

We launched a capital fund drive to pay for the buildings and their refitting. I preached a series of sermons during the drive “casting the vision.” I read those sermons this week. I focused on the opportunity to “do something great for God.” I was carried away by the idea once again as I read the old sermons.

What is a larger and more soaring vision than a united, universal, multicultural church spreading across the globe, bringing the gift of God’s shalom to humankind. The visionary possibilities are many. The ancient prophets described it as the age to come in which lions and lambs would lie down together in peace. Humans would beat weapons of war into farm implements, and every person would have their own home and plenty of food. Even the hills would leak vintage wine in that day.

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That vision was certainly one shared by Paul. The conflict in the church between Jews and Gentiles threatened that vision. But Paul does not take on the role of “vision caster” in his appeal to Corinth. He could have. It likely would have been effective. But he didn’t. Interesting, isn’t it?

As an ordained rabbi, Paul could have made a solid and compelling biblical argument for financial stewardship. Most Christians understand the financial facts of the Christian life.

Here’s the biblical case. Everything belongs to God – everything, without exception. If we don’t understand that everything belongs to God, we will never understand stewardship. However, God is very generous and lets us keep 90% of what we earn. God asks for just 10% of what belongs to God. Financial stewardship is a matter of spiritual exchange. Our financial tithes and offerings support the spiritual system that God uses to nourish our spiritual lives. The temple, the priests and the mission of the people of God are all supported by the gifts of the people. The church, its ministers, its programs, and its mission are a matter of us giving back to God what is God’s in exchange for God providing for our souls through the church.

Christian teachers and ancient and modern rabbis often add to that argument that we simply cannot out-give God. Obedience is rewarded with blessing; God’s rich shalom comes to those who are generous to God and God’s mission on earth. And we often add illustrations of persons or congregations who give generously and who receive rich spiritual rewards.

Paul does not make the biblical argument – and neither do I. It’s legitimate but not large enough to create generosity which, after all, is the real issue.

Several other arguments lay at hand for the Apostle. He could use his apostolic authority and simply order them to give. But he doesn’t. In fact, the authority of office is an argument used rarely by Paul and only as a last resort.

Some stewardship appeals in the church add a most practical argument to the mix. It costs more than \$1,000 per person per year to keep the doors open in most American churches. It costs a bit more at Plymouth given our physical plant and size of programs. It’s a good argument but, like most stewardship appeals, has very mixed results.

Interestingly, Paul doesn’t make a snarky attack on the unused wealth of Corinth and the members of the church. He could have noted that the Macedonian Christians were poor yet begged to give and did so most generously. And they seem to be a happy and peaceful group of congregations, while the rich and stingy Corinthians were a divided, angry, unhappy and ethically-challenged congregation.

Instead of all the above, Paul’s argument is entirely theological and, I must add, much larger. His theological argument has the depth to sustain a life of generosity with joy.

Paul knew from experience the power of Jesus’ spiritual revolution. Jesus moved religion from focus on outward religious acts to inward spiritual transformation. Faith, Jesus preached, is always a matter of the heart. Stewardship, like all of the Christian faith, is a matter of the size and shape of our hearts.

The internal logic of Jesus’ and Paul’s argument is demonstrable. A number of years ago, a poor black woman, Oseota McCarty, made national headlines. She was an elderly woman living on Social Security after a lifetime spent as a domestic worker. Through the years, however, Ms. McCarty saved money regularly.

She made headlines when she gave \$150,000 to Southern Mississippi University for the education of poor children who couldn’t otherwise afford college. The headlines stirred the nation and money poured in to Southern Mississippi University. The Oseota McCarty scholarship fund now supports dozens of poor college students.

Observing genuine generosity apparently generates generosity. I've seen it and experienced it; I suppose you have too.

That's Paul's point as he makes his case. He draws a picture for the Church in Corinth using some big Christian words to describe the generosity he wants to transform their lives and their church.

This offering for the poor of Jerusalem, he writes, is a *koinonia*. You might have heard that Christian word. It's popular in the church these days. Paul used the word to describe Christianity and the internal life of the church. *Koinonia* means "joint ownership," "partnership," "common property," a "common life." To be a Christian is to participate in the life of God and to share it with each other in the community. This partnership extends to the whole Christian church. The Gentile people in Corinth participated in the life of the Jewish church in Judea. That is a matter of fundamental generosity of spirit, life, and resources.

Paul also says the offering is a *diaconia* from which we get the word "deacon." It's usually translated "ministry" and refers to the whole work of the church. Whether clergy or lay person, what we do in the church is ministry. And the offering plate is "ministry" as much as any other part of church life. That ministry extends to the entire Christian church and its mission in the whole world. The Corinthians needed a new vision of their own money and the opportunity to "minister" to others with money.

You all know the Greek word for love, *agape*. It is that special Christian word that describes God and Jesus Christ. *Agape* is sacrificial self-giving for the sake of others. Just as God gives and gives sacrificially of himself, and as Jesus gave himself for the world, Christians "love" each other and the world – sacrificially and giving ourselves to each other and the work of God in the world.

But Paul saves his biggest word until last. It might be the biggest word in the Bible and the Christian vocabulary. The word is "grace." Paul calls the offering for the poor a "grace." He refers to "this grace of giving" several times in the three chapters that make up his stewardship appeal.

In biblical faith, grace is the very center of the character of God. God is compelled to give himself and all of God's gifts to us without any reference to our deserving those gifts or earning God's self-sacrificial love. God just gives because it is in God's nature to give. Nothing we are or do affects God's disposition to do us good.

God's grace is fully revealed in Jesus Christ, grace enfleshed. His touch healed – no matter whom, or how religious or not religious a person might be. Jesus' words transformed his hearers, the good, the bad, and the ugly. His presence drove evil powers away from people others shunned or despised. He emptied himself of all but love, and gave his life in death for the sins of the world – and with no reference to anyone's deserving or earning it. God simply gives sheer grace all the time.

Imagine that! Better yet, accept it and be transformed by it. When we wrap our souls around the amazing grace of God, something happens to our hearts. We can't help becoming sacrificial, self-giving persons generous in acts, speech and heart. We can't help pitching in to help God's work on earth generously, lovingly, and consistently. Why? Because God changes us from the inside out.

And don't forget: God loves a cheerful giver. And grace-full givers will be joyful.

It's a spiritual discipline learned in the practice of it. So just do it!

Amen.