

2 Corinthians
8. Fundraising, 2 Corinthians 8-9

Chapters 8 and 9 of our letter may represent one somewhat oddly conjoined letter with two somewhat different approaches to the question of the offering for Jerusalem, or they may represent two different letters—perhaps one from fairly early in Paul’s relationship with the Corinthian church and one from a later occasion.

In any case both chapters present a plea to the Corinthians to participate in the offering for the poor of Jerusalem, as Paul had promised the leaders of the Jerusalem church in the visit recorded in Galatians 2:10 and continued in 1 Corinthians 16:1–4 and Romans 15:23–29.

While the two approaches are somewhat different one from another, they do not contradict each other in their stated purpose, and from that day until this fund raising is an activity in which even the most fastidious church leader has a hard time practicing perfect consistency. It is, after all, the result that counts.

Competitive Philanthropy (8:1–15)

Paul may be taking his role as a parent to the Corinthians in a less winsome direction here. He is like the father reminding Jack how generous, faithful and altogether responsible Susie has been. Or he is like the fund raising chair for Kiwanis with bar graphs showing which team of Kiwanians has done most to support the many charitable activities of that service organization.

There are several warm and winning asides in this appeal, but the basic strategy is clear, enough. The Macedonians have given generously; you Achaians had better come through. “I do

not say this as a command but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others” (v 8).

In v 9 Paul grounds the appeal for generosity in a narrative deeper and stronger than that of the generous Macedonian churches. “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ” is a familiar Pauline phrase (e.g., Rom 16:20; 1 Cor 16:23; 2 Cor 13:13; Gal 6:18), and the use of the first person plural may suggest that Paul borrows it from a liturgical context where it would also be familiar to the Corinthians.

Narrowly construed, the Greek word for “grace,” “charis,” can refer to a generous gift, so that Paul is comparing the generosity of Jesus to the generosity of the Macedonians and the generosity he hopes to encourage in the Corinthians.

More broadly, however, “grace” is a short hand for the whole drama of redemption in Jesus Christ that Paul celebrated in his preaching in Corinth (for instance 1 Cor 1:18-25). The description of that redemptive drama in this verse is clearly shaped by the context of the appeal for the offering, so it may be too much to press the verse for an understanding of Paul’s Christology. Nonetheless, along with Philippians 2:6-11, our phrase suggests that Paul has some doctrine of Jesus’ pre-existence, that condition in which he was rich. Perhaps like the passage in Philippians this verse also comes from a hymn or prayer used in liturgy; but the fact that Paul uses it suggests a kind of tacit assumption that when God sent the Son, God sent him from somewhere.

In any case the verse still frequently used before the morning offering in worship today raises the stakes on the question of Corinthian generosity. Now they are called not only to emulate the Macedonians but to imitate Christ.

Before he gets to logistical details about the collection of the offering Paul makes two further hortatory points. In 8:11-12 Paul acknowledges that the Corinthians have shown good intentions toward the offering. While he does not come right out and say that the road to hell is paved with good intentions, he is certainly saying that the road to faithfulness requires action as well as intent. What he gives with one hand (you certainly wish to do the right thing) he takes away with the other (but you have yet to live up to your wishes, intentions, promises).

In 8:13-15 Paul reflects on the notion of equality. While he addresses the subject succinctly, it is clear that his idea of Christian fellowship includes a generous willingness to share abundance with those who have less. His vision is one of reciprocity. Now it is the Jerusalem church that needs help from the Corinthians. One day it may be the Corinthians who need help from Jerusalem. Christian fellowship depends on mutual generosity and includes mutual obligation. Paul quotes from the Septuagint version of Exodus 16:18, the time in the wilderness when God gave the people of Israel their instructions for sharing (and not hoarding) the gift of manna.

Organizing for the Offering (8:16–9:5)

Paul commends Titus and two other brothers to the Corinthians as he is about to send them to collect the offering. He does this in part because he can rely on the reciprocal affection of Titus and the Corinthians. Titus is someone they can entirely trust, and now on Paul's recommendation they can trust the other brothers, too. (We have no idea why these two are not named.)

In part the decision to send Timothy and the other emissaries may be a protection against the accusation elsewhere in this letter that Paul might want to take financial advantage of the

Corinthians (2 Cor 11:20), even though he had been scrupulous about not taking support from the Corinthians while with them (2 Cor 11:9). In part this becomes very much like one of those letters of recommendation which Paul himself does not need (2 Cor 3:1) but which here is clearly eager enough to provide.

The section on logistics ends with yet another appeal, now not just to competition with the Macedonians, i.e., Paul's converts in Thessalonica and Philippi, but to fear of being shamed before them. Paul has told the Macedonians how enthusiastically the Corinthians have *intended* to give to the offering. How he hopes that when Titus and Macedonian representatives stop off in Corinth, the Corinthians will live up to their promises. They will neglect the obligation of generosity to their shame—and to Paul's.

Closing homiletical reflection on the offering (9:6–15)

In v 6 Paul offers a kind of proverbial saying that reminds us of Jewish wisdom literature (for instance Proverbs 11:24–25). In the larger context of 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 and the still larger context of Paul's writings, it is clear that this is not some early version of the "prosperity gospel," where those who give generously of their financial resources will see their larders full and their portfolios flourishing. We still live under the mark of the "grace of the Lord Jesus Christ" (8:9), and what abounds for those who live out their generous intentions is the abundance of God's grace. The result of this grace will not be material witness but faithful "good work" for the sake of the Gospel.

Paul finds two texts to reinforce his claim for generosity. The first is an allusion in v 7 to Proverbs 22:9 in the Greek translation, the Septuagint, which includes the assurance about God's love for the cheerful giver. The second is the full citation of Psalm 112:9 in v 9. Both quotations

remind the Corinthians that when they help those in need they participate in God's own generosity, a "righteousness" that "endures forever."

With this move to a kind of theocentric warrant for the offering, Paul puts the theological grounding for generosity at the center of his discourse. Not only does the Corinthian generosity serve God, most importantly the Corinthian generosity will glorify God. The gift itself glorifies God, and when the saints in Jerusalem receive the gift they will glorify God (and by implication the openhanded Corinthians). Furthermore, the generosity of the churches is again reciprocal. The Corinthians will give generously to the Jerusalem community; those who live in Jerusalem will pray generously for the Corinthians.

In v 15 the word for "gift" is the same Greek word as the word translated "grace" in v 14. Whether or not there is a play on words here, there is at least a kind of congruity in the claims of the apostle. God is generous; be generous. Your generosity will redound to your blessing, and to God's glory.

God does God's work. Gentiles send money; Jews lift up prayers. The churches are also the Church; gift encourages gift, and grace begets grace.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Is "grace" an important part of your vocabulary for talking about your experience of Christian faith? If so, how do you understand it?
2. Raising funds for the work of the church or other worthwhile charities can be a challenging but rewarding enterprise. If you have done so, what strategies have you found to be effective? Do they resemble the moves that Paul makes?

3. Which of the appeals that Paul makes in these two chapters strikes you as the most effective in eliciting support?

Further Reading:

James R. Harrison, "The Brothers as the 'Glory of Christ' (2 Cor 8:23): Paul's doxa

Terminology in its Ancient Benefaction Context," *Novum Testamentum* 52 (2010) 156–88.

Stephen Joubert, "Religious Reciprocity in 2 Corinthians 9:6–15: Generosity and Gratitude as

Legitimate Responses to the χάρις τοῦ Θεοῦ," *Neotestamentica* 33 (1999) 79–90.

Jan Lambrecht, "Paul's Boasting about the Corinthians: A Study of 2 Cor 8:24–9:5," *Novum*

Testamentum 40 (1998) 352–68.