



August 11, 2024 West Valley Presbyterian Church

How many of you have ever received funding solicitations? Letters, emails, texts - asking you to donate money to a politician, or a charity, or Public Radio, or maybe your church? Let's see those hands!

I confess that when I get a funding solicitation, I might glance briefly at it. But mostly I either delete or toss, because – except for my church tithe - I make other charitable donations at the end of the year. And if other organizations besides the church bug me before the end of the year, well, too bad. I usually don't stop to consider the theology behind the request. How about you? When you get a letter or an email asking you to donate, do you usually delete or toss? Or do you carefully consider the theology behind that request before you respond? So today we're going to study the section of 2 Corinthians which has to do with the theology of charitable giving.

Paul asked for money too. And since he was Paul, he backed up his request with solid theology about charitable giving. He wasn't asking for money for himself; apparently he felt embarrassed to ask on his own behalf. What he was asking for was contributions to the Christians in Jerusalem.

Here's the situation Paul was addressing: the Christians in Jerusalem were having a very hard time. Because the Romans always seemed to be putting down rebellions in Judea, Jerusalem wasn't exactly a peaceful center of commerce. There was very little for anyone; food and clothing were terribly expensive. And the little food that there was, got purchased by the wealthier citizens, who were NOT the Jewish Christians. The Jewish Christians were regarded by the priests as being apostates. They weren't wanted. So they were desperately poor and hungry. Paul tells us in Galatians 2:9-10 that when he went to Jerusalem to tell Peter, James and John about his ministry to the Gentiles, they gave him the right hand of fellowship – AND, they asked that he and his converts would remember the poor in Jerusalem. Paul says that he was eager to do that very thing.

So that's what Paul is doing. He has asked the Gentile congregations, including the ones in Macedonia and Corinth – to assist their fellow Christians in Jerusalem. The offerings were intended to relieve their dire poverty, and also to express unity between the Gentile Christians and the Jewish Christians.

Hear now the reading of God's Holy Word as it comes to us from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, chapter 8, vv 1-7, and chapter 9, vv 6-11.

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"And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. ²In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. ³For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, ⁴they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people. ⁵And they exceeded our expectations: They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us. ⁶So we urged Titus, just as he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part. ⁷But since you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love we have kindled in you^[a]—see that you also excel in this grace of giving."

"⁶Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. ⁷Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. ⁹As it is written:

"They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor;
their righteousness endures forever."

¹⁰Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. ¹¹You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God."

Here ends the reading of God's holy word. Join me in saying, Thanks be to God.

We know from Paul's letter to the Galatians, and also from his comments at the end of 1 Corinthians, why he is soliciting funds. He is eager to help the impoverished Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, both because they are in need, and also because it's a way to forge connections between Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians. So how does he go about that? What does he say?

Paul doesn't directly scold the Corinthians for delaying their contributions. Instead, he holds up a positive example: the Macedonian church, which is probably where Paul was when he wrote this letter to the Corinthians. He says that the Macedonians were desperately poor – and yet their joy

in Christ overflowed from them, because they had given themselves to the Lord. They wanted to do something in their joy. And what better thing could they do than give to their brothers and sisters in Jerusalem? They were poor themselves, so they knew what it was like to be poor. So they begged Paul, "Please! Let us help! We want to!" ("Urgently pleaded with us" is the more gracious way Paul puts it.) Paul is tactful, so he doesn't quite come out and say to the Corinthians, "Hey, if they can contribute generously when they are in worse shape than you are, then so can you." But he does say, "But since you excel in everything...see that you also excel in this grace of giving." And continuing on, in verses 10-11 he does say, essentially, "You started this collection last year, now finish it up."

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The rest of Chapter 8 and the first 5 verses of Chapter 9 have to do with security arrangements. Paul's colleague Titus is coming to Corinth with at least two other trustworthy and highly esteemed men, to accompany Paul when they bring the combined offerings of the Gentile churches to Jerusalem. In 8:20-21 Paul explains, "We want to avoid any criticism of the way we administer this liberal gift. For we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of man." I think it's interesting that, to this day, churches – including ours – have at least two members present when money is handled. In Presbyterian churches, staff are not allowed to handle the money, because it's a conflict of interest. That's probably true of other churches as well. Churches ought to be 100% transparent and trustworthy in their finances, and it's clear that Paul thought so too.

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In the rest of Chapter 9, Paul talks about the blessing of generosity – the good that generosity does for us. He says, "Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously." He's not saying that we should take everything we have and give it to the church. He is saying that we should decide what we can give, and then do so, with joy. He also says that we needn't be afraid; that God will enrich us so that we can be generous; and then our generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.

That is so true. God has given gifts to all of us, so that we can share them with others. God makes it possible for us to be generous, and then that generosity blesses others. I have seen that happen over and over again, and especially I've seen that happening in this congregation. Dave Blanchard, who heads up our Finance committee, frequently says, "We are a very generous congregation." And he's right!

For example: We owned a 15-passenger gray van for many years. We drove down to Rancho Santa Marta in that van. We have taken youth to their events in that van. But as we all know, times have changed. It's been awhile since we've taken any youth to events; it's getting more and more difficult for us to go to Rancho Santa Marta; and we're not as young as we used to be. The Session elders could have chosen to sell the van, and put the proceeds into our general fund. But they did not. Instead, at Jeff Stanish's recommendation, they chose to donate the van to the Williams Neighborhood Church, which is part of the Christian Missionary Alliance denomination. Its pastor is Greg Prow, whom we know through his years as an elder here.

The Williams Neighborhood Church has a total annual budget of about \$100,000 per year, and that includes everything: salaries, ministry expenses, utilities, building and ground maintenance, and denominational support. Williams is a small agricultural community, mixed Anglo and Hispanic, and most people are very poor. Donating the van has made a huge difference to the Williams church. Plenty of people in their community would have been willing to attend, but they had no way to get there. And there was no way that the church, with its small budget, could afford to buy a bus or a van. And now, they have a 15-passenger van, and more people are coming to worship and getting to know Jesus. Pastor Greg sent a thank you letter to the Session, expressing his profound gratitude for our church's generosity. And I would like to add that it's because of your generosity in the first place, that we even had a van to donate. Thank you, West Valley Presbyterian Church!

As another example: the West Valley Neighborhood Church. Forty years ago, we were a mostly younger church, and the majority of people in our area were Christian of some variety. Now we are a mostly older church, and the majority of people in our area have no religious connection. There are plenty of older people in our area that we can be reaching out to. You've often heard me say that older people have souls, and we are ideally set up to reach out to them. But younger people? Most younger people want to be with other younger people; and if they have any opinion about church at all, it's negative. They are far more likely to go to yoga on Sunday morning. How can we reach them? Well, we can't.

But we can use our resources, generously given in the past, to support pastors who can reach them. That's exactly what we're doing with supporting Caitlin and Joel Rhodes-Karahadian, who are building the West Valley Neighborhood Church. We are by no means their only supporter; they are raising money from other churches and from foundations as well; they would appreciate our prayers for fundraising. But we are the primary supporter, because we have both the facilities they need, and the benefit of generous donors throughout the years. The generosity of gifts in the past are making it possible to reach younger people now, people that we could never have reached on our own.

Besides all that, we also support two home-grown missionaries. We support Rancho Santa Marta. We support Teen Challenge, and Real Options, and West Valley Community Services, and the Refuge, and disaster relief. And if you want to know all the details, talk to Donna Perry, the head of Missions. You'll be impressed! We are indeed a generous congregation; and I think Paul would be proud of us if he were here.

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Paul's right in saying, "Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously." He's not saying that we should bankrupt ourselves. He's not saying we should be stupid. He is not saying that we should give money to thieves and criminals, because that just leads them into sin. He is saying, we need not fear. He is saying that God will give us what we need in order to be generous. Being generous helps us to let go of fear for the future. Being generous helps us grow out of our self-centeredness. Being generous helps us to grow into a deep trust in God. Being generous reminds us that everything we have is from God. We have been

blessed with past generosity. We are blessed now with present generosity. May we also be blessed with future generosity, now and forever.

Let's pray.

Almighty Father, we are so grateful for your indescribable gifts:

your provision for us in this beautiful world, the only planet we know of upon which life exists;

your forgiveness of our sins made possible through the death of your Son;

your mercy that takes pity on us and allows us to approach you;

your grace that has sustained each one of us throughout our lives;

your love that has filled and transformed each one of us by the power of the Holy Spirit.

As you have given so generously to us, help us also to give generously to others.

Drive out our fear, and help us to trust you in all things.

For it is in the name of Jesus our Lord and Savior that we pray. Amen.