

Life Together

*Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?
If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him.
For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.
(1 Corinthians 3:16-17. ESV)*

*And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.
(2 Corinthians 3:18. ESV)*

That There May Be Fairness

March 13th , 2016

2 Corinthians 8:1-15

Assistant Pastor Levi denBok

Introduction:

Good morning! Open your Bibles to 2 Corinthians chapter 8. With our sermon last week we have completed the main argument or the body of Paul's letter to the Corinthians. There was a greeting and a report of what had been going on in Paul's ministry, and then starting in Chapter three Paul put forward the main argument of his letter. Do you remember the main issue that Paul was writing to address? He was writing to defend himself as a true Apostle and to identify the danger of following a false apostle. Now here in chapter eight, the Corinthians are finally in a place where they are ready to accept Paul's leadership. They have repented, they have recommitted to the true gospel as delivered through the true Apostles, and now Paul is ready to get back to where the relationship had left off.

As a side note, do you see how damaging quarrelling and rebellion can be? Paul has been expending a great deal of energy and a great deal of time putting out fires that were caused by rebellion and sin. On the one hand, we can praise God for the stubborn Corinthians because now we have these letters that can teach us how to handle similar situations as they arise in our day. On the other hand, we should note that fruitful ministry that was being done by Paul and by the Corinthian church was hindered for a year because of a lack of discernment and a resentment of leadership. That's not the main point this morning, but let's all tuck that away and remember that rebellion and gossip can halt the ministry that we're doing in this city.

So, the issue having been dealt with, Paul is ready to get back to business. Because we're beginning a new section of the text and particularly because Paul is pointing back to a conversation he began earlier, we're going to spend some extra time this morning in our introduction. Paul had concluded his second letter to the Corinthians (which we know as 1 Corinthians) with a call to take up an offering for the Christians in Jerusalem. In 1 Cor. 16 we read,

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. (1 Cor. 16:1-3 ESV)

The Jerusalem offering is an excellent example of how generosity and wisdom can be combined for great gain. To understand our text this morning we need to understand what this offering was all about. The situation was as follows:

One of the greatest challenges for early Christianity was keeping the church united as the Gospel spread across social and national borders. The Jews were God's chosen people, but in Christ God made it abundantly clear that His Kingdom would be made up of people from every tribe, nation and tongue. This is why Paul can say in Galatians 3:28,

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. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise. (Gal. 3:28-29 ESV)

And so the Gospel spread to Roman cities like Corinth and Philippi. The Gospel was breaking down boundaries and the church was exploding! And yet... As new people get added to the family, things can get messy. People can be tough to deal with! When different cultures collide, they often clash. And so it went in the early church. These new Roman Christians were eating weird things, and dressing in weird ways, and every once in a while they would need reminding that they can no longer sleep with prostitutes. This isn't an exaggeration... This is what the early church looked like. Devout, religious Jews breaking bread with former idol worshiping, pleasure seeking Romans. It was not inconceivable that the church would wind up dividing into two factions: Jewish Christians and Gentile (or non-Jewish) Christians. But then something happened. There was a famine in Jerusalem, and it looked like a devastating, meaningless tragedy, but Paul saw an opportunity for unity.

Paul sent to the prominently Gentile churches and he asked them to take up an over and above offering for the church in Jerusalem. Paul's strategy was brilliant! The gentile church was immature and they were spiritually young but they were also rich in resources. By sharing their resources with their fellow Christians in Jerusalem they would have the opportunity to not only meet real, physical needs, but they would also have the opportunity to communicate solidarity and unity. This was a brilliant, strategic opportunity!

That's what the Jerusalem Offering was about, and that's what Paul is addressing in this morning's text. He had asked the Corinthian church to take part in this offering in his previous letter, and they were ready and willing to do so, but the issue of questioning Paul's Apostleship stalled the process. Now Paul is asking them to do what they said they would do. He's addressing an opportunity to go over and above in giving. I want to be really clear this morning about something. This text is NOT about tithing. There are places in Scripture that inform what our tithing should look like¹ but this text is not one of them. Don't take verses from this morning's text and use them to develop your philosophy of tithing. That would be misapplying the text. I'm not going digress into a sermon on tithing right now because I want to communicate what *this* text is saying to us, because it's an important and necessary word. We often use the analogy "Don't rob Peter to pay Paul" meaning, don't rob the local church to fund the global mission. Tithing needs to happen, but this morning we're talking about over and above giving.

That was a long introduction, but I think it will set the table for us to get the most out of our text for this morning. Look with me at chapter 8 verses 1-15. Hear now the Word of the Lord,

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 favor 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 urged 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

¹ Numbers 18:21-24, Deut. 12:14-18, Deut. 14:28-19 all establish the Old Covenant standard for weekly giving in support of the priesthood, the temple and the poor. Hebrews 7 takes these standards and applies a "how much more?" principle to the New Covenant.

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. 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.”

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Overflow Giving Should...

This text has a great deal to teach us about over and above giving or “overflow giving” as I’ll refer to it from here on out. Now, Paul was writing about a particular situation in history. There is no Jerusalem Offering being taken up right now, but there are some real issues in our world that we need to recognize. The church is still spread out across social, ethnic and economic borders and with that there is potential for division and disunity. I’ve worshipped with Haitian brothers and sisters in their “church” which was literally just a blanket hung as a tarp between four trees in the middle of the woods. At about the four-hour mark, after the second sermon and in the midst of unscripted dancing and singing I came to the realization that there existed some real cultural differences between us. Where was their “order of worship” and why don’t I have a bulletin with five blanks to fill in?! After the service, we walked through the “village” where boards and metal scraps were piled up and called homes. Barefooted, naked children ran through the mud and the garbage to ask us for pesos. I came to the realization that, while we were united in Christ, we lived in very different worlds with very different needs. Paul saw physical needs within the body of Christ as a wonderful opportunity for overflow giving. Let’s study our passage from this morning and discern how it can inform our understanding of giving.

1. Overflow Giving Is Voluntary

If giving is not voluntary that it isn’t giving at all. It’s a tax. Paul is very clear in this morning’s text that he is not *requiring* the Corinthians to follow through on the gift that they had begun preparing in the previous year. That being said, Paul is *urging* them to overflow in generosity. One of the methods he uses to inspire this generosity is the example provided by the church in Macedonia. Here’s what he says about the Macedonians,

For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints (2 Cor. 8:3-4 ESV)

Paul tells the Corinthians that he didn't even intend for the Macedonians to take part in this collection. The Macedonians themselves were living in poverty. He wasn't asking anyone to contribute beyond what they could afford but merely to give as they were able. Because of the hardships the Macedonians were experiencing Paul didn't ask or expect them to be able to contribute at all, but when they caught wind of what was happening in Jerusalem they went *beyond their means* to provide support. They begged Paul to allow them to send funds to Jerusalem. To put that into our perspective, that's something like one of the pastors we support in the D.R. hearing about our collection for the church in India and pleading with us to let his church take part in the giving. While the poverty situation in the D.R. is not as desperate as the situation in India, it is still pretty dire. If our brothers and sisters living well below the poverty line pleaded with us to take part in our offering, I suspect it would inspire some real, voluntary generosity in our midst. That was the situation in Corinth, and Paul wanted to make sure that the Corinthians knew that the Macedonians were making real sacrifices to help the Christians in Jerusalem. He wanted them to see that generosity so that they could overflow in a generosity of their own. Paul wanted the Corinthians to be inspired by the Macedonians who gave not out of coercion or obligation, but out of a voluntary overflowing generosity. So Paul first points to the Macedonians to inspire the giving in the Corinthian church, but then he goes on to point to Christ Himself.

2. Overflow Giving Is Fueled By Grace

Jesus is the ultimate example of overflow giving. You see, before Jesus humbled Himself to be born as a baby boy and to share in the life of hardship and trials that we all experience, He was reigning in Heaven. He was the Lord of Lords and the King of Kings who created the universe and who sustains it. This King momentarily gave up his treasure and experienced our poverty so that we too could share in His riches. Paul writes in verse eight,

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. (2 Cor. 8:8-9 ESV)

Paul is saying, "In case the generosity of the Macedonians wasn't convincing enough – this isn't a *command* by the way – I just want to remind you again of what Christ did in response to *your*

poverty.” Paul is turning up the heat with the Corinthians. The poverty that Christ came to alleviate was not a physical poverty but a spiritual one. Jesus came into the world to make us who were bankrupt in our sin rich in righteousness. He looked beyond our physical state and saw that we were dead in our sin and well on our way to an eternity under the wrath of God and so He entered into the poverty of human flesh to offer the riches of eternal life. This is our King. Jesus Christ, hanging naked on a cross, showed us what it looks like to abound in generosity. If the incarnation and the cross won't inspire selflessness in the church than nothing will.

Paul knew this, so he applies the pressure. It might look as if he's trying to manipulate the church or to make them feel guilty, but that's not what Paul is up to. He's simply telling them the facts. He's not sugar-coating anything. He's saying, “I'm not commanding you to be generous, but I am urging you to consider this: See how generous your poor brothers and sisters in Macedonia have been. See how generous Christ has been to rescue you from the poverty of sin and death. Show how genuine your love is by using your resources to meet this need.” We who have received much grace must be ready and willing to extend that grace to others.

3. Overflow Giving Should Be Done Wisely

Overflow giving should be done wisely. Paul had put forward a clear indication of where this investment would be going. Titus, a trustworthy brother in Christ who had proven his diligence to the Corinthians in the past, would collect the offering. So they know that the offering will be stewarded well. It's in good hands. The money would serve to alleviate the physical needs of the Christians in Jerusalem and would create equality amongst the churches. This gift would promote unity in the body of Christ. So it promises a good return. These are good guidelines for us as we seek to overflow in generosity.

i) It Should Be Stewarded Well

Overflow giving should be stewarded well. Unfortunately, this is a real issue and it's something that we need to be mindful of as we search for opportunities to go over and above in our giving. Wiring \$100 a month to a stranger requires a great deal of trust, and that trust is hard to come by when you see all of the startling statistics about waste and greed in non-profit organizations. There are some wonderful organizations that are doing wonderful things, but there are also some greedy, deceitful organizations that are eager to cash in on your generosity. This is why,

whenever it's possible, we should seek to know the person on the other side of the transaction. Ron Aitken is our Missions Coordinator and before we send resources to a project we send him. We send him to India, we send him to the D.R., we send him to talk to any and every mission partner because we want to make sure that we do our due diligence. There are a number of excellent opportunities for wise investment, and we simply can't afford to send money to someone who is going to mishandle it or misappropriate it. It needs to be stewarded well.

ii) It Should Seek A Good Return

Secondly, overflow giving should seek a good return. Paul was clear about the purpose of the Jerusalem offering. In verse 13 he says,

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.

Paul's intention wasn't to make the Judean Christians rich at the expense of the Corinthians. His desire was for there to be equality amongst the brothers and sisters in Christ. There shouldn't be Christians starving in one city while Christians are living in luxury in another city. So Paul asked the Corinthians to give out of their excess to help alleviate the needs of the Judeans. By alleviating the physical needs of the Judeans, the Corinthians are enabling fruitful ministry to take place in the city of Jerusalem, merely by sharing from their surplus. That's a good return! What's more, this investment would communicate to the Jewish Christians that they are not alone and that their new Gentile brothers and sisters are aware of their need and ready to help. So this gift would alleviate poverty, allow for ministry and promote unity. You can see why the Macedonians pleaded to take part in this offering. It promised a very good return. Contrary to how we might feel at times, it is not wrong for us to desire a good return on the resources we invest. Jesus communicated this very thing in Luke 16. He tells a very confusing parable about a man who was hired to be the steward of a wealthy businessman. This steward caught word that he was going to be fired so he put a plan into action. He approached all of the men who owed debts to his master and he made shrewd deals with them to earn their favour. If someone owed 100 measures of wheat to the master, the servant would take 80 and settle the account, or if someone owed 100 measures of oil he would settle the account for 50. Jesus went on to say,

The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness. For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light. (Luke 16:8 ESV)

What is the point of this parable? The point is that we should use the resources that we have at our disposal today to prepare ourselves for the reality that is coming. People in the business world know this. Some of you in this room work in finance and you know where the best interest rates are and you won't let your money or your clients money sit in an account where it's not going to work up some interest for them. We understand how to be shrewd in this life but we can often be oblivious to the reality that's coming. When Paul wrote to the Philippians he wrote about the interest that they would receive in and through his ministry. He wrote,

And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only. Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again. Not that I seek the gift, but I seek **the fruit that increases to your credit.** (Phil. 4:15-17 ESV)

Paul told the Philippians that the ministry he had been enabled to do through their giving was earning interest for them. When we go over and above in our giving and invest in ministry we use our money to do Gospel work. We take our earthly, temporary treasures that moth and rust will eventually destroy and we use them to store up treasures in Heaven. We ask hard questions about the ministries we're considering investing in because we are seeking a good return.

Application

This morning we've drawn some principles from the text that inform what our overflow giving should look like. Overflow giving needs to be voluntary, grace driven, wise and prudent. All of that is true. It's also true that overflow giving does not replace regular giving. It goes over and above our tithe. We don't rob Peter to pay Paul. But the problem with a call to offer a voluntary gift is that it is very easy to neglect. It's easy to neglect because it doesn't come naturally to a lot of us. We're paying our tithes, we're serving the Lord, and the notion that maybe we should go over and above with our giving just seems like a step too far. Well, it didn't come naturally to the Corinthians either. Here's what Paul says in verse seven:

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. (2 Cor. 8:7 ESV)

There were gifts that were naturally esteemed by the Corinthians. Faith, speech and knowledge are all wonderful gifts and the Corinthians valued and sought after them. Paul applauded them for desiring those gifts, but he challenged them – and he challenges us as well – with this:

1. Desire The Gift Of Giving

Church, desire the gift of giving. Pray for it. Pray that God would break your heart for the needs and the inequality that are so prevalent in our world. Pray that he would stir generosity up in you as you go about your day. For the most part, we naturally rise to meet the needs that we see.

That's why child sponsorship speeches are effective and why the commercials on the television for World Vision draw us in. We're not robots, and when we see needs we often step up and meet them. However, there are a lot of needs that aren't seen.

I mentioned earlier that it can be challenging to know which ministries are going to steward your resources well, but I'm about to read a list of ministries that have been screened and approved. They have been investigated by Ron, then they had to be approved by our missions committee, and then they had to be approved by our board of elders. These ministries have been prayerfully thought through and considered by over 19 people that you know and trust. Now that doesn't mean that they are the only trustworthy ministries in the world, not at all, but it does mean that these are excellent, trustworthy investments for you to consider. I'm going to list the current ministry opportunities that have been screened and investigated and that we're currently investing in as a church. All of this information is available at the church website².

Family Circle	Our outreach to young single moms
VBS	Our youth driven Vacation Bible School
James 127	Our feeding program for seniors and those needing assistance in our community
<u>Living for Jesus</u>	Ministry to the vulnerable in our community
<u>Orillia Pregnancy Resource Centre</u>	Pregnancy counselling services
Counselling	Next Step professional counselling services
Common Good	Our support of other valued community resource groups
<u>Youth STM</u>	March break outreach
Camp Sponsorship	Financial assistance for youth in camp programs
<u>IMB/ GTA</u>	Working with Punjabi's in the GTA

² <http://www.firstbaptistorillia.org/missions/index.php> accessed on March 8, 2016.

<u>Teen Challenge</u>	Addictions rehab program
<u>Living Hope Native Ministries</u>	First Nations Outreach
<u>NAMB</u>	North American Missions Board
Canadian Global Response	Humanitarian Relief
Dominican Republic	Kingsview Child Sponsorship Kingsview Widow Support Public School Outreach Teams Pastor & Lay leadership training
<u>IMB / South Asia</u>	International Missions Board outreach in Delhi and the Punjab
Theological Famine Relief	Providing theological materials to national pastors & lay leaders
<u>Guardians of Hope</u>	Health support program in South Asia
<u>Voice of the Martyrs</u>	Support to the Persecuted Church

It would take a long time to give you a detailed debriefing of each of these ministries but if you talked to Ron I'm sure he'd love to tell you about all of the wonderful things that are happening.

As we close this morning, we're going to talk a bit about our money. I want to communicate clearly that money is not evil. Money is a resource – it's a means to an end. Money can be used for wonderful things and it can be used for sinful things. It can be invested in temporary pleasures or it can be invested in eternal treasures. Paul didn't shame the Corinthians for having money, and he didn't ask them to give all of their money away and to live on the street. He asked them to consider the generosity of the Macedonians, to consider the generosity of Christ, to consider the present state of the Christians in Jerusalem and to prayerfully discern whether they wanted to give a gift out of their excess.

And that's what I'm asking you to do today. I'm asking you to pray for the gift of giving and to consider whether God is calling you to go over and above in your generosity. I'm not asking you to be irresponsible, or to put yourself or your family into a precarious position, but I believe this text is urging us to consider whether we can give more.

I want to address one of the objections that we most frequently make, and I want to hold it up to this text. We often make the excuse that we simply don't have enough extra resources to give the way that we would like to. We have some real financial obligations. We have our tithes, our

mortgage, our car payment, our insurance, our groceries, our spending, our RRSP contributions, our RESP contributions and then there's always something in the house that needs fixing. By the time it's all said and done, there's just not much left over. I understand that objection. I've *made* that objection! But as I studied this text I was so struck by verses 13 – 15.

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." (2 Cor. 13 – 15 ESV)

That word "fairness" really struck a chord with me. My budget is what it is because that's the standard of living I have grown to expect. I stopped to pray as I finished considering this text and I was humbled. We have brothers and sisters in Christ who are literally praying right now for God to provide food so that they can feed their kids today. My standard of living is here*, and theirs is here*. And I considered the word "fairness", and I see that Paul's not even asking us to sell all that we have but merely to give what we're able to give so that our brothers in Christ can experience fairness. And he says that maybe one day their abundance will provide for our needs. So, I just want to invite you this morning to prayerfully consider whether the standard of living we've decided we deserve is fair. The financial resources we have truly are bound up in the standard that we set for ourselves. The amount of excess – the overflow giving – will be determined by how many rooms we have in our houses, how much we need to put in that RRSP and how nice that car is that we drove to the church with today. I have some changes to make in my life. I imagined what it must be like for Christians living in overwhelming poverty to read a text like this. Do they experience hope? Hope that their overwhelmingly wealthy brothers and sisters will obey the text and help meet their needs? Or do they experience frustration because this text has been here all along but our houses and our bellies just keep getting bigger. Fairness.

If you feel compelled to grow in the gift of giving, I want to challenge you this morning to talk to Ron and our mission's team. Find out what the need is, and find out how you can help. There are pastors in India who already know the language, who already have the relationships, but who need the finances to be properly trained for ministry. That's an investment that will multiply. God is doing REMARKABLE things in the Dominican Republic right now. It's functioning as a modern day Geneva – a theological centre – as people from across Latin America are flocking there to receive training. A revival is taking place and you can invest in the training and

equipping of leaders who are evangelizing and transforming the Spanish-speaking world as we speak. Christians are being imprisoned and even murdered for their faith. There are men praying in their prison cells for God to provide someone to feed their families because they have been left to fend for themselves and through voice of the martyrs you can meet very real and desperate needs.

We're going to respond today by praying. Just as the Corinthians needed to be reminded that there was a struggling church in Jerusalem that was a part of their family, so too do we need to be reminded that we have brothers and sisters across the world that are a part of our family. I've asked Ron to provide five pressing needs that our global family is facing today and we're going to put each need up on the screen for 90 seconds. Read the need, and then pray where you are, or turn and pray with the person beside you. When we've finished praying we'll sing the doxology, and then I urge you –though I don't command you – to consider how you can overflow in your giving that there might be fairness in Christ's church.