

Among the complaints against organized religion in general and Christianity in particular, is that one is always being asked for money. In defense of the church, it stands to reason that if one desires the ministries of the church and its ministers; places to go for prayer and worship and many other things, then one ought to be willing to help pay. Thus there is a practical reason for giving

To be sure, a stewardship emphasis, and that is not really what this sermon is, will always focus first on the grace that we have been given, and on the meaning of gratitude.

Spiritual health, proceeds from an acknowledgement of a kind of weakness, and that provision has been made, and gratitude and generosity are the healthy response to the gift of life, and of salvation. There are practical and spiritual reasons for giving.

And there *are* dangers. Some use religion as a means of acquiring wealth and at times the church has placed an undue burden on its people by neglecting their needs while spending excessively, beyond reasonable expectations. Guilt has been wielded like a weapon to squeeze people for more than they can afford. Horrors stories abound.

Having said all that, we come to the text in 2 Corinthians and see that Paul himself seems to have been in charge of the Church's first One Great Hour of Sharing special offering campaign.

Please and Thanks

Bear with me while I "chase a rabbit." It has been my experience that there are two prayers of utmost importance for the spiritual life. And both of these prayers are appropriate when pursuing the topic of generosity and giving. They are simply these two words: Please and Thanks.

Ordinarily we associate these words with good manners, and to be sure, one must not fail to see the importance of good manners. But if all you hear me say this morning is, "mind your manners," then you will have missed the point.

"Please" is a profoundly powerful and deep prayer. It comes from great desperation and deep hunger. Whenever we survey our circumstances honestly, take stock of "the human condition," we are forced to recognize our lack. It is possible to acknowledge this neediness superficially, most of the time that is what we do. But sometimes life casts us before the helplessness at the root of all human living.

We depend for our well-being on the grace of God and the gifts of others; upon a set of social, economic and

political systems that is at least exponentially bigger than we are, and over which we exercise no control. In the grand scheme of things, we stand before an abyss *empty-handed*, and at some point in our lives we will *know* that we stand there.

At that time our prayer is not, “please this or please that,” or some petition, or some wish, even a noble wish, but just, “please,” which means, “if you please.”

Sometimes our rock and roll poets of the last 60 years give us helpful words. At the moment I am thinking of an old blues song written by someone named Robert Johnson but popularized by Eric Clapton and Cream, “Crossroads”:

I went down to the crossroads
fell down on my knees
I asked the Lord above for mercy
Save me, if you please

Or Jesus on the cross, “My God, my God . . . where are you?”

And from time-to-time we, by grace, come to see, even in a moment of desperation like that, that we have indeed been saved. Our rescue was in the works all along. Love and forgiveness are baked into the fabric of the universe just like matter is, by the creator of all things. And when that realization comes, the instinctive response is, “thanks,” not for this or for that, but just,

“thanks,” more a sigh of relief than good manners, welling up from somewhere deep inside. I am finished chasing the rabbit.

The Offering

It happened sometime about 20 or 25 years after the time of Jesus, that the fellowship of believers in Jerusalem came to be in great need. History tells us that there was a famine, several years of failing crops, and the people came to poverty for simple lack of life’s most basic resources.

There had been some conflict among early Christians over the way in which Gentiles were being added to the church. Some believed that they ought to become fully Jewish in order to be accepted as fully Christian. Others did not think it necessary. Paul had advocated their acceptance.

As you might imagine, they argued back and forth like children. They took sides. Hateful words were undoubtedly spoken and good manners were abandoned. It is good for us to understand that Paul was asking those on one side of this debate to give a generous offering to those on the other side.

As Paul writes to the church in Corinth he is aware that a commitment to help has already been made and they simply need to follow through. Isn’t that the way of the spiritual life; we have promised to give our lives to

God, but can only carry it through day-by-day and do not always live each day in that kind of devotion.

Paul has several things to say about the situation. He does not want to make a competition out of it, he doesn't want to make a spectacle out of coming up short on the commitment either.

And there is a relationship with the recipients to consider. They have given much to the spiritual lives of those in Corinth, and now they need help. Paul says he wants there to be reciprocity. There is equality in generosity.

The Gift

What Paul says about this offering is true enough about offerings; give what you can according to your means, and be aware that somewhere along the line someone else will help out when you need it. But there is more to it than that.

Our acceptance of Christ means that we have promised to devote our lives to God. We have acknowledged that God has sacrificed for us, now we in turn carry out our promise daily, in part by becoming generous.

In accepting redemption, we promise to live, in so far as we are able, lives characterized by truthfulness, righteousness, and justice, and by love and mercy as

well as generosity. I am certain this ethical principle is not widely practiced in the world, but let us seek it amongst ourselves.

The complaint that the church makes excessive demands comes from the same lack or emptiness from which the excessive demands come. There is a failure to adequately assess the situation; to see our helplessness before the vastness of creation, before life.

One way or another this failure persists among people who stand before the abyss empty-handed and are able to believe that there is no abyss or that somehow they have, on their own, the resources to meet it, in other words, able to believe they are not empty-handed.

Once we are able to see ourselves as we are and to see God's provision, then we find the desire to achieve excellence in faith and speech and knowledge, in complete earnestness and in love, and in the grace of giving, both the giving of our gifts and also giving ourselves as a gift, just as Christ has given his life for us.

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