

2,5,26 2 Cor. 8:1-24, The Honorable Use Of Our Finances

Paul devoted one chapter in 1 Cor. (Ch. 9) and two chapters in 2 Cor. (Chs. 8 & 9) to the subject of Christian giving. In 2 Cor. 8 the focus is on a previous commitment the Corinthians had made to financially help the saints in Jerusalem who were under persecution.

Keep in mind that as we go through Paul's instruction of how Christians are to view the whole issue of finances, the topic of money is important, but it's also a very delicate subject, because unfortunately even Christians, if we're honest, we tend to be more concerned about making and holding onto our money than on learning how and when to give it away; we don't seem highly motivated to "store up treasure in heaven." And if we *are* expected to give some of our hard-earned money to someone else, we want to know how to ensure that it's as little as possible, but that it still fits any expectations the Lord might have for us.

Because of all that; Paul's instruction in these chapters is going to be good news, if for no other reason than helping us relax because *no* giving is compulsory. Religious-obligation-giving and guilt-trip giving are concepts developed by men to keep their bank accounts as safe and as flush as possible. But that's just the world's viewpoint infiltrating the Church. Paul explained the *Lord's* viewpoint in these chapters in his Corinthian letters.

He shows that this service to others flows in two primary directions – toward spiritual authority and toward those in need. Since we already touched on the first one when we studied 1st Corinthians 9, I'll just briefly summarize Paul's instructions so we can have the full picture, but I'll be spending most of our time tonight on Paul's discussions in 2 Cor. 8.

So, when we studied his exhortation on giving in 1 Cor. 9, Paul's emphasis was on the need for God's people to financially support those who taught God's word to them. Here's a brief overview of Paul's comments that we looked at in that study;

In 1 Cor. 9:11 Paul bottom-lines this subject with what he knows to be God's will in the issue of financial support for those who minister "spiritual things" to the saints; (quote) "If we have sown spiritual things to you, is it too much

if we reap material things *from* you?” In vs. 12 Paul added; “If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we even more?”

In vs's 7-11 Paul goes into more detail about what this implies and why the Lord wants it to be this way;

Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard without eating any of its fruit? Or who tends a flock without getting some of the milk (from the flock)? Do I say these things on human authority (in other words, ‘is this just my opinion’)? Does not the Law say the same? For it is written in the Law of Moses, “You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain.” Is it for oxen that God is concerned? Does he not certainly speak for our sake? It was written for our sake, because the plowman should plow in hope and the thresher thresh in hope of sharing in the crop. If we have sown spiritual things for you, is it a great thing if we reap your material things?

Author Dr. Jack Arnold summarizes this section;

Whatever it takes materially to support a soldier is given so he can be effective in battle. The communicator of God’s Word, who is a soldier of Jesus Christ, renders a service to the church; therefore, he should be paid by those he serves. The farmer who owns and plants a vineyard eats from the vineyard. If a pastor or teacher plants and waters a spiritual vineyard by teaching the Word, then those who are recipients of the spiritual teaching should support him. The shepherd who keeps a flock of sheep drinks the milk from the sheep. A Bible teacher feeds the sheep spiritual food, and the sheep should supply the teacher with physical food. The point of the soldier, farmer and shepherd is that all three are to live with the assistance and support of those to whom he ministers. Anyone who receives instruction in the word must share all good things with his instructor.

It's a simple concept of knowing that the one teaching, if he's doing his job, will be spending a great deal of time praying, studying, researching, and then communicating to the saints what the Lord gives him. And they, as an act of thankfulness, will support the teacher financially, realizing that the work the teacher is putting into this has spiritual value for them.

One of the most important words to note in all this is the word "spiritual". When we studied 1 Cor. 2, we saw that there are some pastoral ministries that are spiritually dead. I'm sure we've all experienced pastors, or podcasters, or guest speakers, (whatever) that all claim to be teaching the scriptures and we can sense that nothing of real value, nothing spiritual, is happening. That which is spiritual brings light and clarity, and helps advance the spiritual growth of the believer. Christians are not under any obligation to financially support spiritually dead ministries.

If we believe that the teaching we receive has true spiritual value for us in advancing our knowledge of Christ and His Word, then (and *only* then) responding with financial support for the teacher is strongly encouraged.

This was the norm in the early church, and for the last 2000 years it's been the modus operandi for most of God's people.

Now, since Paul had already covered that in his first letter, rather than repeat his exhortation, Paul changes his emphasis in 2 Corinthians to the principles and guidelines of giving in general, and the topic in *this* case is on helping other believers who are suffering poverty. As I mentioned earlier, Paul's specific focus is on a previous commitment the Corinthians had made to financially help the saints in Jerusalem who were under persecution.

(1 Cor. 8:1-8) Moreover, brethren, we make known to you the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia: that in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded in the riches of their liberality. For I bear witness that according to their ability, yes, and beyond their ability, they were freely willing, imploring us with much urgency that we would receive the gift and the fellowship of the ministering to the

saints. And not only as we had hoped, but they first gave themselves to the Lord, and then to us by the will of God. So, we urged Titus, that as he had begun, so he would also complete this grace in you as well. But as you abound in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all diligence, and in your love for us—see that you abound in this grace also. I speak not by commandment, but I am testing the sincerity of your love by the diligence of others.

Let's start with the historical setting that made this exhortation necessary.

(Acts 11:27-30) Now at this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them named Agabus stood up and began to indicate by the Spirit that there would certainly be a great famine all over the world. And this took place in the reign of Claudius. And in the proportion that any of the disciples had means, each of them determined to send a contribution for the relief of the brethren living in Judea. And this they did, sending it in charge of Barnabas and Saul to the elders.

(1 Cor. 16:1-4) Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I directed the churches of Galatia, so do you also. On the first day of every week each one of you is to put aside and save, as he may prosper, so that no collections be made when I come. When I arrive, whomever you may approve, I will send them with letters to carry your gift to Jerusalem; and if it is fitting for me to go also, they will go with me.

(Rom.15:25-28) But now, I am going to Jerusalem serving the saints. For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. Yes, they were pleased to do so, and they are indebted to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in their spiritual things, they are indebted to minister to them also in material things. Therefore, when I have finished this, and have put my seal on this fruit of theirs, I will go on by way of you to Spain.

The Lord told Agabus that a famine was coming, so the apostles immediately challenged the churches in Asia to give whatever they could to churches who were the hardest hit by the famine.

This is a brief comment by Kent Hughes on this passage;

It is also important that we understand that this section of Scripture is not about tithe (which was an Old Covenant system of income tax on the people of Israel). It is about gifts to another church. It is about God's grace as it relates to giving. It is about the motivation *behind* giving.

The reason I wanted to include that is to emphasize the fact that all actions taken by the early Christians, whether in support of those who taught them or in helping those in poverty, was done based on love, not Law. If what a teacher is communicating has value, love and gratitude recognizes that – if the saints in some part of the world are suffering poverty, love motivates a response by those who can help them.

I just want us to never forget that this is the age of Grace; which means that in whatever giving or support that happens, it's meant to be voluntary, not mandatory. The motive is to be gracious, not detached obedience to commandments written in stone. Paul will stress that several times in our 2 Cor. 8 passage.

Here's a quote by Sparks that helps explain the importance of distinguishing between Law and Grace when it comes to *any* service we do in Christ's Name;

You can have Christian law just as much as you can have Mosaic law; you can be in bondage in Christianity just as much as men were in Judaism.

Christianity can be made into an imposed system just as much as Mosaic law was, and there are many Christians today who live under the fear of the "Thou shalt" and the "Thou shalt not" of a legalistic conception of the Christian life. You can take the Bible as God's standard for your life and try to fulfill it and yet still be burdened with a sense of constant failure. It is God's standard, and it is a very exhaustive one which leaves no part of the practical life untouched, but those who make the effort to try to live up to it only end

in disillusion. No, it is not just a matter of a Book but of a Person, the Person who did live up to that standard, absolutely fulfilling every least demand with the most perfect success, so satisfying God to the full. By His death He has delivered us from the bondage of legal demands. This same Person now lives in us by His Holy Spirit, seeking to work out that perfect will of God not on the basis of some binding instructions from without but as a living force within. We have the law written in our hearts. To be in Christ is a matter of Life and not of legalism.

Now, Paul further “humanizes” this by using the example being set by the Macedonian Christians. They did all they could to support the saints in Jerusalem even though, they themselves, were also in poverty.

(Ch. 8:2-3) In a great trial of affliction the abundance of the (Macedonian’s) joy and their deep poverty abounded in the riches of their liberality. For I bear witness that according to their ability, yes, and beyond their ability, they were freely willing (to give).

That’s not Law, that’s Grace; and it’s Grace that glorifies God because it allows others to see His image expressed in real-life situations expressed through His people. What the Macedonians did was not a natural response to situations like this – and it becomes even more ‘supernatural’ when we see what Paul added in vs. 4, “(The Macedonians) were begging us with great earnestness for the blessing and fellowship of helping the saints.” That’s pure Christlike. Our Savior prepared His whole life to be qualified through sinlessness to make the sacrifice He made, and when the time came, He did not just *surrender* to the Cross; He *ran* to it.

There are different theories as to *why* they had to “beg” Paul to let them help. We know their motivation, but I found some commentaries on this that were helpful.

(A.T. Robertson) Apparently Paul had been reluctant to press the Macedonians because of their manifest poverty. They demanded the right to have a share in it.

(R Kent Hughes) added this: They gave “beyond” (literally, “contrary to”) their ability. St. Chrysostom marveled, “*They did the begging, not Paul.*” The sense

is that Paul, seeing their extreme poverty, was reticent to take their gifts because he knew it would deepen their deprivation and plight. But they wouldn't be denied. "Paul, we entreat you, don't deny us this honor." Giving was not something to be avoided, but a privilege to be desired.

On a personal note; that's one of the reasons I haven't done what a lot of podcasters do which is ask for financial support. I don't want anyone giving support each month out of compulsion or obligation. If any of those who hear our studies feel that the studies have value to them, they will respond voluntarily without any "begging" on my part. That's a decision that's meant to be between them and the Lord and is no one else's business, including mine. One pastor I used to listen to called this "the privacy of the priesthood". His listeners understood the principle and most helped support him, but he never talked about finances unless it came up in a verse-by-verse study. I've always admired that in him and tried to take the same approach.

And that's why Paul wrote this in 2 Cor. 8:8 and 9:7, "I speak *not* by commandment (I'm not ordering or mandating anyone to do anything), instead "... let each one give as he determines in his own heart (between himself and the Lord) not grudgingly or of compulsion; for God loves a cheerful giver."

You can see the atmosphere Paul is trying to create around issues of financial giving – it has to be private, gracious, and an act of either gratitude to the teacher or compassion to the poor, or both. We'll talk more about what a "cheerful giver" is when we get to that chapter.

Somebody might ask, If this is not by commandment, then why would Paul need to add this in 2 Cor. 8:8; "... I am testing the sincerity of your love by the diligence of others"?

Part of the problem with this verse is the translation; here's a better one; "I am examining the genuineness of your *profession* of love by comparing your actions to the diligent actions of others."

Author Murray Harris explains it like this: "Spontaneity and warmth would be absent from the Corinthians' giving if coercion were present. But he did

see in the enthusiastic generosity of the Macedonian churches an excellent standard for assessing the genuineness of the Corinthians' professed love for him and for all believers, as well as a compelling incentive to arouse them to action."

When I first read that I could see why Paul might add this to a *Corinthian* letter, but *not* include it in a letter to the Phillipians or the Thessalonians. The Corinthians had a habit of not putting their money where their mouth was. Their profession did not always reflect their actions.

But at the same time, we should be very hesitant to (quote) "test someone's sincerity". Unless we're dealing with an Ananias and Saphira situation, trying to read other people's hearts is not something we should get involved with. I found a true-life instance that shows what can happen if we do;

Charles Spurgeon and his wife would sell, but refused to give away, the eggs their chickens laid. Even close relatives were told, "You may have them if you pay for them." As a result, some people labeled the Spurgeons greedy. They accepted the criticisms without defending themselves, and only after Mrs. Spurgeon died was the full story revealed: All the profits from the sale of eggs went to support two elderly widows. Because the Spurgeons were unwilling to let their left hand know what the right hand was doing, they endured the attacks in silence.

People who judge others rarely know the whole story.

Ok, here's our next section in 2 Cor. 8 (vs's 8-15);

You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich. And in this I give advice: It is to your advantage not only to be doing what you began and were desiring to do a year ago; but now you also must complete the doing of it; that as there was a readiness to desire it, so there also may be a completion out of what you have. For if there is first a willing mind, it is accepted according to what one has, and not according to what he does not have. For I do not mean that others should be eased and you

burdened; but by an equality, that now at this time your abundance may supply their lack, that their abundance also may supply your lack—that there may be equality. As it is written, “He who gathered much had nothing left over, and he who gathered little had no lack.”

The overall exhortation in this passage is that Paul wants them to do what they apparently promised to do a year earlier (but never got around to doing it). In the context of this, he gave them (and us) some additional principles to keep in mind.

First, sacrificing to help others was exemplified by the One Who gave up everything to help us. If we’re going to follow in His steps, personal sacrifice for those who need our help should characterize our lives – again, not as compulsion, but as an opportunity to live what we say we believe.

Then he restresses the need for us to remember that all sacrifice should come from a “willing” heart, not a religious heart; “If there is first a willing mind, it is accepted according to what one has, and not according to what he does not have.”

The implication of the last part of that phrase is expanded in the next verse: “For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened; but by an equality, that now at this time your abundance may supply their lack, that their abundance also may supply your lack.”

We aren’t being asked to give to others to the point where we impoverish ourselves. We saw this played out in Acts 2 & 4 where everyone gave what they could and the result was that *all* needs were met.

(Acts 2:44; 4:32-35) Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common. And with great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And great grace was upon them all. Nor was there anyone among them who lacked; for all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, and laid them at the apostles’ feet; and they distributed to each as anyone had need.

(John 13:34-35) A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you also must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are My disciples, if you love one another.

(2 Cor. 4:11) . . . in order that the life of Jesus may be manifested through our mortal flesh.

You can see what an incredible impact something like that would have on onlookers in the city where the Church was doing these things. Obviously, the word spread throughout the community about this new fellowship where people loved each other more than anything anyone had seen before – and it was spontaneous, not forced. It was based on freedom and willingness, not communism (there's a huge difference between saying, "What's mine is yours" and saying "What's yours is mine".)

Something else I should mention is that there was a danger in this. Some of the onlookers were no doubt impressed, but others took a different approach. We're all familiar with the Ananias and Saphira incident in Acts 5. It's not a coincidence that this happened immediately following Acts 4.

People have often wondered why God was so severe with that couple. All they did was lie about how much they gave. If God killed everyone who lied, we'd all be dead. So, why them and why then?

Because people began to join themselves to this group of loving strangers with ulterior motives which ranged from "Awesome! Free stuff! Where do I sign up?!" to "I'll give *some* of my money so I can stay in good standing, but I'll say I gave more so they'll be impressed." Either way, God needed to get everyone's attention right at the start to make sure that the purity of the love being expressed stayed that way.

Here was the result of what God did; Acts 5:11, "Great fear came upon all the church and upon all who heard about these things." Not only did word get out about the amazing love of the saints; the word also got out about how God deals with deception and hypocrisy.

Some people who were considering joining the Church when they saw Acts 4, hesitated on making that decision after they saw Acts 5.

Then Paul closes that section with a quote from Ex. 16:18, “He who gathered much had nothing left over, and he who gathered little had no lack.” Don’t take more than you need, God will supply where there is a lack.

All these principles helped set a foundation for how giving should be carried out in the fellowship of the saints.

In the last part of this chapter, Paul simply reviews everything that had taken place to make sure the Corinthians had a full background and understanding of the events leading up to the writing of his letter;

(2 Cor. 8:16-24) Thanks be to God who puts the same earnest care for you into the heart of Titus. For he not only accepted the exhortation, but being more diligent, he went to you of his own accord. And we have sent with him the brother whose praise is in the gospel throughout all the churches, and not only that, but who was also chosen by the churches to travel with us with this gift, which is administered by us to the glory of the Lord Himself and to show your ready mind, avoiding this: that anyone should blame us in this lavish gift which is administered by us— providing honorable things, not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men. And we have sent with them our brother whom we have often proved diligent in many things, but now much more diligent, because of the great confidence which we have in you. If anyone inquiries about Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker concerning you. Or if our brethren are inquired about, they are messengers of the churches, the glory of Christ. Therefore, show to them, and before the churches, the proof of your love and of our boasting on your behalf.

Most of this doesn’t need any explanation; but there are couple comments Paul includes that we’ll touch on which contain important principles applied to how we would also want to act in similar situations.

Paul starts by including Titus in a group of men that are honorable and are truly serving the Lord. They have all committed to travel together to take the gift of financial relief to Jerusalem and to do all they can to make sure it gets there.

But the next verse (vs. 20) is a little strange in the NKJ translation; “Avoiding this: that anyone should blame us in this lavish gift which is administered by us.” I’m not sure how “blame” would come in, but here’s a better translation;

[For] we are on our guard, intending that no one should find anything for which to blame us in regard to our administration of this large contribution.

And the next vs. (vs. 21) helps also;

For we take thought beforehand and aim to be honest and absolutely above suspicion, not only in the sight of the Lord but also in the sight of men.

I’m not a huge fan of John Calvin, but we have to give honor where it’s due. He made a statement one time, not directly related to 2 Cor. 8, but in principle it does show what Paul was concerned about, and it’s something I wish all pastoral leadership took more seriously. He said, “Nothing more certainly invites slanderous attacks than to be handling public money.”

As you all know, Judas desperately wanted to be the one among the disciples that “handled donated money”, because from time to time, he skimmed some of it into his own pockets.

(John 12:3-6) Mary took a pound of very costly oil of spikenard, anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped His feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the oil. But one of His disciples, Judas Iscariot, Simon’s son, who would betray Him, said, “Why was this fragrant oil not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?” This he said, not that he cared for the poor, but because he was a thief, and had the money box; and he used to take what was put in it.

By the time Paul wrote to the Corinthians, everyone was aware, not only of what Judas did, but of the likelihood of a growing number of so-called Christian leaders being less than honest about their finances. So, when Paul begins to ask people to

give him money for the poor and says, “trust me; I’ll take care of it”, the possibility of some degree of skepticism might surface.

That’s why Paul was worried about being “blamed” or accused of pilfering from this “gift” that he was collecting for the Jerusalem saints.

Paul wasn’t blind to what was happening in his generation, and we shouldn’t be blind of the Osteens, Benny Hinns, and from what I’ve read, the richest scam artist of all of them, Kenneth Copeland whose net worth is around \$750 million dollars.

As we talked about earlier, giving should be private and voluntary; but for the one receiving a gift, I think accountability to others is a good plan. And as Paul words it in vs. 21, Our handling of money gifted to us should be done in a way that “provides honorable things” - in other words, it means taking our responsibility seriously and acting honestly, not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men.

And don’t forget Ananias and Saphira. Whatever we may get away with in the sight of men is not going to escape the sight of the Lord. If we have nothing to hide, why *wouldn’t* we be willing to be held accountable?

Here are some comments by a 20th century theologian named Thoralf Gilbrant;

Paul took whatever steps were necessary so no one could blame him with financial impropriety. Paul could write like a poet and think like a theologian; but he could also act with the meticulous accuracy and integrity of the best accountant. Some leaders conclude they do not care what people think as long as they know their ministry is acceptable with God. Paul was of a different opinion. His carefulness as a church administrator led him to plan ahead with due consideration for things honest before men *and* God. This was especially true regarding church finances. He determined that everything would be both honest and open. He left no room for suspicion or criticism.

So, Christian scammers are not just a 21st. century problem; it’s been around since the Fall. The Corinthian letters are proof-positive that Paul is not going ignore or avoid dealing with real life issues whether they are popular and acceptable to talk

about, or not. Compromise is unacceptable, in the sight of men (as our testimony) and in the sight of God, Who is our Master.

So, as I said at the beginning our studies in chapters 8 & 9, Paul devoted three entire chapters to the governing principles of financial giving. 1 Cor. chapter 9 dealt with the financial support of teachers by their students and chapters 8 & 9 in 2 Cor. dealt with giving related to helping others in need.

My hope is that we now have a good grasp of what giving in the Church Age is all about, but especially that this can be a good reminder that Grace is meant to guide *all* our actions in the Church Age (whether giving or anything else); Grace is to be the atmosphere and motivation for *all* we do. Anything other than that, like legalism or religion, mars the image of Christ that is meant to be seen in us.

We've seen in John and Acts that it's not legal obligation, but love of the children of God for each other, that not only defines who we are as Christ's disciples, but also manifests the image, the character of Christ to the world.

Our sacrifice in giving is to be motivated by the same love that motivated the sacrifice of Christ in our salvation. Giving, motivated by love and seen by others, is the one of the greatest outward confirmations of the indwelling Christ. This should sound familiar;

(1 Cor. 13:3) Though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, but have not love, it profits me nothing.

So, whether it's financial support for a teacher as in 1 Cor. 9 or "goods to feed the poor" in 2 Cor. 8, if the motivation is not either gratitude for the spiritual instruction we've received or compassion for the poor, "it profits nothing", because the bottom-line of all giving, just as with any good work, is that the love of *Christ* may be seen.

Under Law all people see is religionists doing their best to imitate righteousness; under Grace, all the glory goes to the true Source of the action – the inworking of the Holy Spirit bringing the life of Christ through us. From God's viewpoint, that is far more important than the work itself, which is why the absence of love cancels the spiritual and eternal value of the work.

But where Christ is reigning in the heart and the work done is directed by Him, those works are gold, silver and precious stones and they will last forever.

(Heb. 6:10) God is not unjust to forget your work and labor of love which you have shown toward His name, in that you have ministered to the saints.

(Matt. 25:23) His lord said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.’

He is keeping a record and He will reward anything and everything we do as led and empowered by Him. And *those* rewards are eternal.