

2 Corinthians 8:16-9:5
(Ezra 8:24-30; Matthew 25:14-30)
“The Grace of Giving: Integrity and Accountability”

Introduction

Americans are among the most generous people on earth and its citizens support a wide range of relief and development organizations around the world. Christians are among the most generous American citizens and, in addition to relief and development organizations, support local churches and mission organizations around the world. I hope that we would be just as generous if we received no tax incentive for such giving, but the fact is that wherever one travels in the world, people comment on the surprising generosity of Americans.

It is quite another matter, however, whether or not Americans are as wise in their giving, as they are generous. People will often give in response to a moving appeal that they see on TV or that comes to them online or through the mail without doing due diligence in finding out about the organization making the request.

A few Christmases ago, one of my adult children suggested that we find a charity we all approved of, one that gave assistance to the poor, and make a family gift, instead of the adults giving one another things we don't need. Someone suggested that we pick something from the Heifer Fund catalogue that we all receive about this time of year. However, when I checked online with Charity Navigator, I discovered that, while Heifer Fund is transparent – open and honest about its finances – and does what it says it will do, it spends far too much of what it receives on administrative fees and advertizing. On the other hand, Franklin Graham's Samaritan's Purse was highly rated for costing much less to provide the same kind of ministry, and so enabled us to accomplish much more for the same amount of money.

What does that have to do with our text? Everything. In the verses before us, Paul gives us an extremely practical and helpful picture of how to give responsibly and wisely. He focuses on those who are in the middle of charitable transactions, as he and Titus were in the matter of this collection for the poor within the Jerusalem church, requesting, collecting and distributing the funds being gathered from the Gentile churches. His example is helpful for all the parties involved, for those being solicited for a donation and for those who will receive the gift, but especially for those in the middle, requesting, collecting and distributing.

In other words, this text should be extremely helpful to us as a church that relies on the gifts of its members to support the ministries that are at the heart of our reason for being. Look with me this morning at how carefully, how transparently, with what integrity, Paul describes how the gift he has requested will be collected and distributed, and how careful he is that nothing might raise the slightest suspicion of misappropriation of funds.

Body

1. The importance of relationships (8:16f).

Paul commends Titus and those taking part with him in the collection as people known to the Corinthians and worthy of their respect and trust. It is important in making gifts to have some kind of relationship of trust with those who are reporting a need, proposing a response, putting together a plan, and then implementing the plan.

The reason that we have been able to engage our own community so effectively is because of Kathy Smith and her team's long and faithful engagement with communities of need throughout our city, and the partnership of many of you who have led the way and labored faithfully to give your time and talents to make our community better. Where those trusted relationships exist, we can give with much greater confidence, knowing that we are being faithful stewards.

In pursuing global mission, Piers and his team spend much of the year overseas doing the same thing, establishing relationships, experiencing ministries on the ground, not just in their polished brochures, prayer letters and well-crafted proposals, and prayerfully discerning whom we should be partnering along side in global cities, and in challenging, as yet unreached, parts of the world.

2. The importance of legitimacy (8:19a).

One of the key questions we should ask has to do with the legitimacy, not only of the one asking for help, but of the one collecting and distributing donations. Paul is careful to note that those involved in the collection and distribution described here have been "appointed by the churches" to oversee this gift. They are not simply freelancers who have decided to do this, but people of integrity who have been requested by the donor churches to make certain that the gifts are handled and distributed honestly and honorably.

So, too, it is crucial that you know whether or not someone asking you for a donation has been vetted and approved by other donors. I have been grateful throughout my adult life to belong to congregations, before I was a pastor and since, that appointed trustworthy people to handle donations, and that surrounded them with all the checks and balances necessary to continue over many years to earn the approval of faithful, wise and inquisitive donors. It is not enough for someone simply to have a good idea and decide to begin a ministry fund or organization. There must be a legitimacy to the process.

3. The importance of clear motives (8:19b).

Paul cites two important motives for those involved in Christian stewardship: Displaying God's grace and glory, and demonstrating a sincere desire and willingness to help those in need of the affection, solidarity and good will of other Christians.

These are not the only motives for faithful stewardship, and Paul will later write of other motives, but these two motives, the desire for God's glory and for the good of those in need, mark the difference between true stewardship and self-aggrandizing gifts given in hope of receiving praise.

4. The importance of integrity (8:20-21).

Paul is very concerned, not only to conduct this collection in a way that is pleasing to the Lord, but also in a way that is honorable "in the sight of man." So often, Christian witness has been damaged in the public square by Christians accused of financial dishonesty and greed, using the Gospel as a product to be sold. In the light of the prosperity teachers who have been troubling the Corinthian Christians, Paul wants to do all things related to this collection in a way that demonstrates transparency and openness.

We too should do all we can both to be, and to partner with, those known for financial integrity. Anything less jeopardizes the reputation of Christ and his church in a culture that has grown cynical of religion, and that welcomes any opportunity to point out the hypocrisy of Christians.

5. The importance of finishing well (9:1-5).

Paul ends our text with a call to the Corinthians to finish what they have begun, to do what they have promised, to fulfill their pledge. If his words sound manipulative, remember that these are Paul's spiritual children, and he is speaking as we do to our adult children: I told them what lovely people you are. Don't make me look like a fool. I told them what a great cook you are. Don't make a liar of me.

So, Paul says, the Macedonians, in spite of their poverty, decided to participate in the collection when they heard about your determination to make a gift. Now, they have given generously. Don't let them show up in Corinth and discover that you've failed to do as you promised.

When people ask how they can pray for me, I always say, Pray that I will end well. So many, sadly, do not end well. And it begins, I think, by allowing a pattern of beginning well, with great hopes and dreams, but when things get hard, quitting, and failing to do what you've promised. End well, Paul says.

Conclusion

So, what are we to make of this? To state the obvious, it is wonderful to be generous. In the verses we studied last week, joyful generosity was highly commended. But it is also important to be wise, for generosity without wisdom is irresponsible. There will always be more good things clamoring for our help than even the wealthiest among us can possibly engage. But if we understand that we belong to the Lord, and that neither our lives nor our resources are our own, then we will seek to engage in stewardship with the wisdom only God can give, and to be those, and to partner with those, who value relationship, demonstrate legitimacy, have clear, God-honoring motives, are known for integrity, always aiming to finish well that which we have begun. May God make us wise and faithful stewards of all that he has entrusted to us.

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