

More Encouragement for the Church

2 Corinthians 9:1–5
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This evening's text highlights the apostle Paul's pastoral genius once again. The Corinthians, who had promised to take a collection for the church at Jerusalem, hadn't done so. Men of lesser skill than Paul might have chewed them out. "What do you mean you haven't taken the offering yet? It's been over a year. What are you waiting for?" But Paul knew that tactics like this seldom accomplish much. So, he chose a gentler approach — one that's a little confusing and even more surprising.

This is what we'll look at this evening in the first five verses of 2 Corinthians 9.

Paul's Boast

The unexpected feature of Paul's approach toward the Corinthians appears immediately in the first verse of this evening's text. Having spent the entire eighth chapter of this letter commenting on the Macedonians' generosity, the Corinthians' unfulfilled pledge, and the apostle sending three men to Corinth to assist the church in fulfilling its promise, Paul then said, "It's superfluous and unnecessary for me to say anything to you." Really? And then he went on for another chapter to say even more. All told, he spent two entire chapters on a topic he said wasn't needed.

Of course, this isn't the right way to interpret this verse. Paul's point wasn't that he didn't need to say anything, but that the Corinthians were fully aware of where everything stood. They knew they had made a promise to contribute to the collection for Jerusalem and had not done so. They knew that the saints in Jerusalem were counting on them, as were many others who were waiting to see what they would do. And they understood that their gift resulted from God's grace being poured out on them. But they needed encouragement. And that's exactly what Paul gave them.

Of all the things he could have said to urge them on, Paul cited one specific and important detail in the second verse. He wrote, *For I know the forwardness of your mind, for which I boast of you to them of Macedonia, that Achaia was ready a year ago; and your zeal hath provoked very many.* What each church does affects many other churches. When the church in Corinth (in the province known as Achaia) pledged to take part in a collection for Jerusalem, their promise spurred others to act similarly, including the churches in Macedonia, which were significantly poorer. In the previous

chapter, Paul rejoiced that the Macedonian churches had given far beyond their ability — so much, in fact, that Paul even tried to discourage them a little. And they weren't alone. The end of verse 2 says that the Corinthians' zeal *hath provoked very many*.

Meanwhile, the church at Corinth had done nothing to fulfill its commitment. It had had a year to act. This was the second time Paul mentioned this. He wanted the church to do what it said it would.

Paul also focused on the Corinthians' eagerness to give. It was their eagerness, even more than an actual gift, that motivated the Macedonians and others to give. They didn't suffer from a lack of desire. Neither were they short of funds. On the contrary, they were fairly well off. The problem was follow-up. They just hadn't done it. We don't know why because Paul didn't say. Maybe he didn't know.

Nonetheless, the Lord used the church's initial zeal to move other churches to action. This was a good thing, but it would be even better for the church to follow through with its commitment. Who knows, maybe this would have encouraged other churches even more?

The Three Brothers

Starting with verse 3, Paul explained why he sent the three men he mentioned in the previous chapter. It wasn't to rebuke the Corinthians but to encourage them. He didn't want his boast regarding their generosity to be in vain. He wasn't worried, though. He was confident the church would meet the challenge.

So, Paul's purpose in sending the three men to Corinth wasn't just to promote giving. He assumed the church would want to help others and was probably excited about doing so. And the three men were more than administrators. They would also confirm the apostle's boasting, i.e., that his glorying about the Corinthians was true and justified. Why? Because his boasting wasn't really about the Corinthians. They just gave him the opportunity. But what he boasted in — the only thing he boasted in — was his God, who does great and wonderful things. In his first letter to the Corinthians, he wrote, *That, according as it is written, He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord* (ch. 1:31). And later in this letter, he said, *But he that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord* (ch. 10:17). In particular, Paul boasted in the cross of Jesus Christ. Galatians 6:14 says, *But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world*.

The men who went to Corinth had heard Paul boast. They went to Corinth not only to see for themselves what Paul boasted in, but also to join him in boasting. They wanted to glory in the Lord and praise his mighty name for the work that God had done and was still doing in and for his people.

But Paul wasn't satisfied with this. According to verse 4, sometime after Titus and the two brothers reached Corinth, Paul planned to join them with a group of men from Macedonia. Acts 20:4 identifies at least some of these men by name, viz., Sopater of Berea, and Aristarchus and Secundus of Thessalonica. Paul didn't want them to arrive with him in Corinth only to find that the Corinthians still hadn't fulfilled their pledge. That would have embarrassed him and the church. He didn't want this. He wanted everyone — himself, the three men and the Macedonian brothers — to boast in the work of God. He was always looking to enlarge the number of people who rejoiced in God through the Lord Jesus Christ.

Of course, any embarrassment Paul and the Corinthians felt was a minor thing. Of greater importance is the offering for Jerusalem represented. It was a show of love and unity within the broader Christian community — God's people caring for one another, manifesting his grace toward those in need. It would have been a wonderful confirmation of the Corinthians' faith. And it would have shown the Corinthians standing with all the other churches that had taken part in the same collection. That's why Paul wanted the men of Macedonia to witness it. He wanted them to see the harmony and cooperation of all the churches.

There's a word in verse 4 that highlights this. It's translated *confident*. The Greek word is ὑπόστασις and literally means that which lies under something else. It identifies a fundamental reality, a foundation. We often use it to describe the personal union of our Savior's two natures (the hypostatic union), but it doesn't actually mean *person*. There are other words for that. This word is more basic. The KJV translates it as *substance* in Hebrews 11:1 — *faith is the substance of things hoped for*. In our text, Paul used it to emphasize the certainty of his boasting. He was absolutely convinced that everyone — the three men he sent to Corinth and those who joined him from Macedonia — would agree that his boasting in the Corinthians was appropriate.

The Blessing

Now, let's look at verse 5. The meaning of this verse is clear: Paul had exhorted the men he sent to Corinth to assist with the collection and to do so in such a way that would promote generosity over obligation. He wrote, *Therefore I thought it necessary to exhort the brethren, that they would go before unto you, and make up beforehand your bounty, whereof ye had notice before, that the same might be ready, as a matter of bounty, and not as of covetousness.*

But there's a word that we need to focus on. The KJV translates it twice as *bounty*. The NKJV uses "generous gift" and "matter of generosity" instead. As far as translations go, either is acceptable. But the Greek word is εὐλογία, from which we derive our word *eulogy* or literally 'a good word.' I avoid using the word *eulogy* because eulogies are usually exaggerated attempts to preach dead people into heaven; it's much better just to recount the facts of a person's life and accomplishments in an obituary. But in the Bible, this word means something very different. It's a blessing. First Peter 3:9 says, *Not rendering evil for evil, or railing for railing: but contrariwise blessing; knowing that ye are thereunto called, that ye should inherit a blessing.*

I've made the point several times in our study of 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 that Paul didn't use words like money or finances, but preferred to speak of the church's gifts as grace. Here he called them blessings. God blesses us, and then he expects us to bless others with the blessing we receive from him. Wasn't this the point he made about Jesus in the previous chapter: *For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich* (v. 9). He wanted the Corinthians to model the generosity of Jesus.

When I ask folks how they're doing, a lot of folks respond with a quote from Dave Ramsey, viz., "Better than I deserve." This is certainly true. Each of us is better than we deserve because we deserve nothing but God's everlasting and severe wrath. He spares us only because Jesus bore the wrath of God for us. But when I was teaching in the seminary, I noticed a very different response from most of the black students. Their answer to "How are you doing?" was "I'm blessed." That always impressed me more than "Better than I deserve." A person would be better than he deserves if the Lord reduced his time in hell by just one second, but I doubt anyone would call this a blessing. But God's blessing, on the other hand, is an outpouring or showering of his favor.

That's what Paul wanted to see in the Corinthians — not an unfulfilled promise, not grudgingly satisfying an obligation, not helping others just because Paul wanted them to, but an abundance of sincere love and compassion, just as Jesus blessed us with when he took our sins on himself and died under God's heavy wrath. When we understand this, how can we not give generously to kingdom causes when asked to do so?

The Corinthians didn't follow through with their pledge to take a collection for the church at Jerusalem because they didn't understand what giving is. It's a privilege. The Lord blesses us so that we can use whatever he gives us to further his work. He gives us the gospel; we share it with those who need it. He gives us encouragement and occasional rebukes; this is to help us minister to our

brothers and sisters in Christ. And when he gives us the opportunity, we should also help those in need.

This implies a couple of things. One is that we should view giving as an act of worship and service, even when it's done outside the context of public worship. Giving is a service to the Lord and a ministry to others. Another consideration to note is that if we want our children to learn the gracious art of giving, we need to teach it to them. It doesn't come naturally. We need to encourage them from the time they're knee-high to a boll weevil. By word and example, we should urge them to give because our heavenly Father gave us the greatest gift of all — his Son.

Saying that we'll give is good, but actually doing so is even better. We can boast of God's grace best when we and others learn to imitate it. Amen.