

In Genesis 33, Jacob blesses Esau.

It’s an interesting moment!

After all, Jacob had purchased the birthright from Esau for a pot of stew,
and then Jacob had impersonated Esau to obtain the blessing of the firstborn,
from their father, Isaac.

This means that Jacob has the right of inheritance.

But what does this mean?

The firstborn gets a double portion – twice as much as his younger siblings.

Since there are only two sons, this means that Jacob will get 2/3 and Esau 1/3.

Of what?

Isaac owns no land.

So it will be 2/3 and 1/3 of the flocks and herds of Isaac.

But in Jacob’s absence, Esau now controls *all* the flocks and herds of Isaac.

Isaac had inherited everything from his father.

But Jacob has received everything from God.

Truly the blessing of Abraham has come to Jacob –
not that Jacob has received the flocks and herds of Abraham
(Esau has those)

but that Jacob has the *presence of God* with him.

Abraham’s 318 trained fighting men have now grown into Esau’s 400 men.

Jacob comes in a posture of humility to his brother.

Esau speaks of Jacob as “my brother” –

but Jacob speaks of Esau as “my lord.”

What is more, Jacob brings a gift – a present –

which is ordinarily given by the inferior to his superior.

But then in verse 10 things start getting interesting:

For I have seen your face, which is like seeing the face of God, and you have accepted me.

What happened when Jacob saw the face of God in chapter 32?

He wrestled with him – and he prevailed.

Jacob is now wrestling with Esau – in diplomacy!

Jacob could have come with haughty arrogance,

claiming the birthright and insisting that Esau bow before him.

But Jacob is no idiot!

He is seeking to appease his brother.

He wants Esau to stay in Seir and leave the Promised Land to him.

But he knows that a blessing is not a contract.

You do not bless *in order to* get what you want.
You bless others because you wish them to have life and prosperity before God.

Esau, on the other hand, appears to have no more interest in God's promises
than he had years before when he sold the birthright for a pot of stew!

And so Jacob, in his diplomatic wrestling,
changes his language:
he has been saying, please accept this gift (this present),
but now he says, "please accept my blessing."

Many commentators have said that Jacob feels guilty about "stealing" Esau's blessing,
and so he is offering this gift as a token of his repentance.

This entirely misses the point!
This has nothing to do with guilt
(after all, there is no indication in Genesis that Jacob was guilty!)
rather, this has to do with Jacob's *very cautious* assertion
of the right to bless his brother.

He humbles himself before his brother –
he will not be proud and arrogant.
If Jacob understands that the promise to Abraham is still 400 years away,
then he may well have understood that "the older shall bow to the younger"
may also be centuries away!

And in so doing, Jacob portrays the humility of Christ.
Think about it:
Jesus was King.
But he humbled himself and became a servant.
Jacob is the heir – he has received the birthright and the blessing –
but he does not need to make a show of it.
And so he humbles himself before Esau.

All Jacob wants is for Esau to renounce any claim on the blessing/birthright.
And Esau does.
Esau vacates the Promised Land and returns to Seir.
In effect, Jacob gives Esau 550 animals
in exchange for Esau's renouncing the inheritance.

It would appear that Esau received all of Isaac's flocks.
He certainly seems to have Isaac's servants!
What does Jacob get?
The blessing of Abraham.
A blessing that is still 400 years away from its fulfillment.
But Jacob sees, by faith, that the blessing of Abraham is what *really* matters here.

Jacob lives a very precarious life in the land.

He is a wandering nomad in the midst of powerful tribes.

But he understands that this blessing – and the presence of the living God that goes with it – is worth any sacrifice!

(even humbling himself before the brother who should have bowed to him!)

Our Lord Jesus will do this when he stands before Esau's heir, Herod.

He could have asserted the right of Jacob (or, of course, his divine status!), but some things are more important than asserting your rights.

If you are obsessed with your own legacy –with your own name – your own family – then you will fade into obscurity.

But if you seek the *face of God* –

if your quest is to know God, and Jesus Christ, whom he has sent, then as you persevere in that quest,

you will receive that imperishable name that Jesus has received from his Father.

Our Psalm of response, Psalm 112, speaks of such a blessed man.

Psalm 112

Read 2 Corinthians 8:16-9:5

In verse 5 Paul speaks of the Corinthians' gift as a "blessing."

He is sending the brothers to arrange in advance for the blessing you have promised, so that it may be ready as a blessing, not as an exaction.

Likewise, in verse 6, "whoever sows with blessings will also reap with blessings."

What is a blessing?

In Greek, the word "blessing" is *eulogia* – a "good word."

That's where our word "eulogy" comes from.

The Latins translated that as *benedictus* – where we get "benediction."

But plainly, the idea of blessing means more than just "saying nice things" –

because here Paul refers to this *gift* as a *blessing*.

Words and deeds are connected.

If you say "be warm and filled" – but you *do* nothing for the poor – then your words are a mockery – not a blessing!

That's why we started with Jacob and Esau.

Jacob's humble words were matched by his generous gift –

his words and his deeds together formed a *blessing* for Esau.

Think back to the *content* of the blessing of Jacob by his father Isaac (Gen 27:28-29):

"May God give you of the dew of heaven and of the fatness of the earth

and plenty of grain and wine.
Let peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you.
Be lord over your brothers, and may your mother's sons bow down to you.
Cursed be everyone who curses you, and blessed be everyone who blesses you.”

This is the blessing of Abraham.
Land, Seed, and the blessing of the nations.
Abundant life in the presence of God.

That's what blessing is all about.

But for the Christians in Judea – they are not experiencing blessing.
They are experiencing famine and death.

And Paul says that the Christian church should be a blessing to each other.
We should be ready and eager
to *bless* our fellow Christians around the world when they are in trouble.

Last time, we heard Paul's three principles of giving:
earnestness – sincere, serious attention to relieving the needs of others;
readiness – being willing to give in proportion to what we have;
and fairness – giving *now* with confidence that others will give when we are in need.

In our passage for today, Paul fleshes out some more of the first two principles.
What does earnestness in the gospel look like?
What does readiness mean for the church?

First Paul shows us what earnestness looks like
by introducing the three brothers who will be preparing to receive the gift.

1. The Commendation of the Brethren: Earnestness in the Gospel – from Christ to Us to You (8:16-24)

a. Titus – Discipleship Means *Following Jesus* – as Patterned by Paul (v16-17)

¹⁶ *But thanks be to God, who put into the heart of Titus the same earnest care I have for you.*

¹⁷ *For he not only accepted our appeal, but being himself very earnest he is going^[d] to you of his own accord.*

He starts with Titus.

Or, to put it more accurately,

he starts with *God* who put into the heart of Titus the same earnest care I have for you.

This is important because it reveals how discipleship works.

Paul did not put it into the heart of Titus.

Paul *exemplified* earnest care.

But Paul did not change Titus's heart.

It was about a decade ago that an intern said to me,

“Peter, I hear you preaching about community –
about what it means to be the body of Christ –
and I see you and your family doing it –
but I don’t see many others doing it –
and what really perplexes me is that you don’t seem to be bothered by that!”

I am not the Holy Spirit.
I don’t change peoples’ hearts.
I don’t put things in the hearts of others.
I can preach – and I can try to put it into practice –
but I cannot change the hearts of others.

I can say, with Paul, “imitate me as I imitate Christ” –
but Christ always remains the pattern – the archetype.
And the Holy Spirit is the one who puts into your heart.
Yes, the Spirit uses the preaching of the Word –
and the Spirit uses the faithful example lived out by other Christians –
but the Spirit is the one who changes hearts.

And thanks be to God who has put it into the hearts of so many of you
to have the same earnest care for one another that I have for you!

Paul says that Titus is himself “very earnest.”
The word translated “earnest” is often used in secular Greek
in the context of a “heightened sense of civic duty” (Guthrie, 421)
One who is *earnest* is committed to the well-being of his city – of his people.
In Christ, we are citizens of a new city – the heavenly Jerusalem –
and therefore we are *earnest* for the well-being of our fellow-citizens.

If you love Jesus,
then you will love those who belong to Jesus!

And so Paul once again uses the pattern that we have seen repeatedly in 2 Corinthians –
Christ not only died *for you* –
he also died as an example that you should follow.
Because we *participate* in Christ
therefore we are called to imitate him.

As he said earlier in verse 9:
*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 this calls forth echoes of what Paul had said in 6:10 about himself and his colleagues –
“as poor, yet making many rich.”

And we are reminded of the pattern of Christian ministry:
from Christ to us to you.

Paul has been talking for five chapters about the nature and character
of a sincere, genuine Christian ministry.

Paul and his traveling presbytery have demonstrated the same pattern:
“as poor, yet making many rich.”

Paul is remarkably open about his poverty.
He wants people to *see* how he is imitating Christ in his own giving to others.
He doesn't brag about particular gifts –
(Jesus said to do your giving in secret, after all) –
but the pattern of Paul's life is open to all.

Christian giving – *particularly* Christian giving for the poor and needy –
should be characterized by the same earnestness that was found in Jesus –
the same *grace* –
that though he was rich –
though he was in the form of God,
he did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped,
but humbled himself – made himself nothing.

Titus has seen this in Paul –
but God is the one who has put this in Titus' own heart –
so that he now comes to the Corinthians of his own accord.

But Titus is not coming alone:

**b. The Famous Brother – the Importance of the Church in Administering Gifts
(v18-21)**

¹⁸ *With him we are sending^[e] the brother who is famous among all the churches for his preaching of the gospel.*

There is lots of speculation over who this is – but we don't need to know who he is.
Indeed, his anonymity is all the more important because it highlights two things:

First, he is famous for his *preaching of the gospel*.
He has a good reputation throughout the churches for his gospel-ministry.
And not only that...

¹⁹ *And not only that, but he has been appointed by the churches to travel with us as we carry out this act of grace that is being ministered by us, for the glory of the Lord himself and to show our good will.*

This famous brother is being sent *by the churches* to join Paul in ministering this “act of grace.”
In the book of Acts, we will hear about what happens when Paul arrives in Jerusalem.

Paul is a very controversial figure in Judaism.
He has been welcoming uncircumcised Gentiles into the Christian church –
which some Jews still considered a sect of Judaism.

His service in ministering this gift was intended:
for the glory of the Lord himself and to show our good will.

By doing good to the Jewish Christians in Judea,
Paul wants to demonstrate that he has not abandoned the Jewish people.
Rather, the Christian gospel is the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham –
the blessing of Isaac –
that all those who bless you shall be blessed.

And so he is urging Gentile Christians to *bless* the Jewish Christians in Judea
as a demonstration that the Gentiles have been grafted in to the one olive tree.
The Lord Jesus has not *replaced* the Jews with the Gentiles.
Rather he has *added* the Gentiles – he has grafted in the Gentiles –
so that the promises to Abraham might be fulfilled in his Seed.

That's why all this is “for the glory of the Lord (Jesus) himself
and to show our good will.”

The famous preacher has been chosen by the churches in order to assist in this call.

Again we see how Paul is redefining the idea of “civic virtue.”

In the Greco-Roman world, what you aim at is the glory of your city.
Your financial gifts are designed as benefactions for your fellow citizens.
If you are a good Corinthian, you will further the aims and purposes of Corinth!

And yet Paul is urging the Corinthian *Christians* to impoverish the city of Corinth
by sending their money *out* of Corinth to Jerusalem!

But it is worth taking the time to think about the principles embedded in verse 19.

Paul is an apostle.

You might think that an apostle would be “above the law.”

But no, Paul says that this famous brother has been appointed *by the churches*
to travel with us as we carry out this act of grace that is being ministered by us.

There is financial accountability – oversight – *even for an apostle.*

This is why we want to make sure that in all our financial dealings as a church.
There should be transparency and accountability in all financial decisions –
from counting the offering to preparing the budget to making investment choices.

Transparency and accountability do not suggest a lack of *trust*.

Rather they are designed for protection and safety.

Think of Paul.

When Paul leaves Corinth,
he will have the gifts of the Christians in Macedonia *and* Achaia.
In other words, there will be a large sum of money in his possession.
He needs a large number of people with him –
both for accountability and for protection!
There are no banks.
You can't write a check!
You have to transport the gold yourself!

That's why Paul says in verses 20-21:

²⁰ We take this course so that no one should blame us about this generous gift that is being administered by us, ²¹ for we aim at what is honorable not only in the Lord's sight but also in the sight of man.

Paul has already insisted that he is not one of the “hucksters”
he is not a peddler of the word of God –
who preaches only for money.
And now he will be walking away from Corinth with a very large sum of money!
If something goes wrong, he will need protection.
And if he is by himself, then he has no one to help.

In one sense, these are very ordinary precautions.
There is nothing particularly “Christian” about having financial safeguards!
It is honorable in the sight of man to be financially responsible and accountable!

But we should think about this principle more broadly:
“we aim at what is honorable not only in the Lord's sight but also in the sight of man.”

Paul draws this principle from Proverbs 3:4 –
Paul is practically quoting the LXX translation of that verse:
“aim at what is honorable in the sight of the Lord and of people.”

But this applies to more than just money.
Everything we do should be done with the Lord's opinion as our chief concern.
Is it honorable to God?
Is it beautiful in his sight?

But we should also be concerned for what is honorable in the sight of *man*.

As an example of this,
right now the session is working on a new policy
for those who work with children at MCPC.
In a small church it can be easy to say, “Oh, but we all know each other!”

All of us have known someone who was sexually abused.

Abusers are generally *not* strangers.
It is honorable in the sight of the Lord Jesus to protect the weak.
And yes, this may mean at times a little inconvenience.

If we are going to protect one another – and be accountable to one another –
then it will require that our practices are honorable also in the sight of man.

c. The Third Brother – Apostles of the Churches, the Glory of Christ (v22-24)

²² *And with them we are sending our brother whom we have often tested and found earnest in many matters, but who is now more earnest than ever because of his great confidence in you.*

In verse 22, Paul mentions a third brother that they are sending –
a brother who is also “earnest in many matters” –
and is now “more earnest than ever because of his great confidence in you.”
Again, we do not know his name –
but we don’t need to know his name.
It is enough to have his character held out before us as an example.

The implication should be clear:
we should have such earnestness in our pursuit of following Christ –
in our *care* for those who are in need.

And then in verse 23, Paul summarizes the roles of the various members of the delegation:
Titus represents Paul and his traveling presbytery.
The other brothers represent the churches –
thereby providing multiple parties
who can hold each other accountable with the money.

²³ *As for Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker for your benefit. And as for our brothers, they are messengers^[E] of the churches, the glory of Christ.*

And particularly, Paul refers to the brothers as *apostles* of the churches, the glory of Christ.
“Messenger” correctly captures the meaning here.
But it is simply the word “apostle.”

What does it mean to be an “apostle” of the church?

It’s worth noting that Paul *never* refers to himself as an “apostle of the church.”
He always speaks of himself as an *apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ*.

We tend to think of “apostle” as a glorious office.”
But *apostle* simply means someone who was sent by someone else.

The word “apostolos” was used regularly in Greek literature to refer to a messenger.
If you were sent by your uncle Frank to ask a favor of your neighbor,
you might say, “I am an apostle of uncle Frank,
could he borrow your wheelbarrow?”

So, the fact that someone is called an “apostle” just means that they are a messenger.

Though in the very act of stating that these brothers are “apostles of the churches”

Paul affirms that this is also a glorious office,
since they are also “the glory of Christ.”

After all, through their faithful preaching and ministry in the churches, Christ is glorified.
Therefore, they are the glory of Christ.

²⁴ *So give proof before the churches of your love and of our boasting about you to these men.*

And so in verse 24, Paul urges the Corinthians to “give proof before the churches”
(in the persons of their messengers – their apostles)
“of your love and of our boasting about you to these men.”

And that proof is what Paul describes as the “ministry for the saints” in chapter 9, verses 1-5.

2. The Ministry for the Saints: The Corinthian Readiness in Blessing (9:1-5)

a. Your Readiness Has Stirred Up Others (v1-2)

9 Now it is superfluous for me to write to you about the ministry for the saints, ² for I know your readiness, of which I boast about you to the people of Macedonia, saying that Achaia has been ready since last year. And your zeal has stirred up most of them.

Paul recognizes that in one sense it is redundant – it is superfluous – to keep writing about this.

But he is plainly concerned that the Corinthians do not seem to be as ready as they claim.

So he uses them as an example for themselves!

Your zeal – your readiness – to give generously
has stirred up the saints in Macedonia.

Paul has been boasting to the Macedonians of how “ready” the Corinthians are to give.
But perhaps due to the conflict referred to in chapters 1-7,
Paul now wonders how ready the Corinthians really are!

Is this a readiness only of intent?

Do they keep saying “Oh, yes, we’re ready!” –
but they never actually get around to doing it?

Back in 1 Corinthians 16:1-4, Paul had said,

“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.

If it seems advisable that I should go also, they will accompany me.”

Several months have passed and it appears that the Corinthians have *not* collected much. Perhaps Titus has told Paul that the Corinthians *say* that they are ready, but there is no money *actually* collected! Certainly if the Corinthians had *done* what Paul said, there would be no need for Paul to admonish them in this way!

And so Paul sends the brothers to them:

b. So Make Sure That You Are Ready! (v3-5)

³ *But I am sending^[a] the brothers so that our boasting about you may not prove empty in this matter, so that you may be ready, as I said you would be.* ⁴ *Otherwise, if some Macedonians come with me and find that you are not ready, we would be humiliated—to say nothing of you—for being so confident.*

If it turns out that the Corinthians had just made a bunch of empty promises – and then Paul wound up boasting about what they had promised – only to find out that they didn’t really mean what they said – that would *not* be a happy result!

We like to pretend that we don’t care about honor and shame anymore. But that’s simply not true!

I am scheduled to preach here next Sunday. If you invite your friend to come to church next Sunday to hear me preach – and then I don’t even show up – you would be ashamed and embarrassed – and *I* would be ashamed and embarrassed too!

Because Paul’s boasting is based on what the Corinthians themselves have said. The Corinthians had *told* Paul that they were eager to participate in this act of grace. Paul had then reported to the Macedonians that the Corinthians were ready. Now, it appears that the Corinthians are *not* as ready as they had said.

If you make promises – and then someone else makes plans based on those promises – then you *should* be ashamed for failing to do what you have promised – because you would let others down, and you would make other people look bad!

I know that some of you don’t like to hear that. You have had bad experiences with people who said ‘you made me look bad!’ But Paul does not wait until it is too late and then use this as a club. Rather, he takes the opportunity to exhort them to be diligent – so that they can *avoid* looking bad.

And he says in verse 5:

⁵ *So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to go on ahead to you and arrange in advance for the gift^[b] you have promised, so that it may be ready as a willing gift, not as an exaction.^[c]*

You have promised a *blessing*.

And this “blessing” is contrasted with an “exaction” –
as the footnote points out – this can mean “a gift expecting something in return.”

The point is – don’t be stingy.

Don’t give to others with an expectation of reward.

God challenged me on this point as I was preparing this sermon!

Friday night we got a call from our Rwandan friends.

They had a big conference planned for the next day (yesterday).

But the venue that they had reserved had pulled the plug on them at the last minute.

They had nearly 200 people coming to South Bend for a conference –

and now they had nowhere to hold it!

We had been looking forward to our first quiet Saturday in months.

Instead we barely saw each other all day,

as Ginger and I hosted our Rwandan friends.

Are you willing to give a blessing freely – at significant cost to yourself –
or will you expect something in return?

And quite frankly – there was barely any cost.

As Ginger put it Friday night,

“The Rwandans lost everything – and everyone – in the genocide.

What is one day of inconvenience for us?”

But you do not bless others *in order to* get them to do what you want.

You bless others in order to participate in the blessing of Christ.

For he took upon himself our suffering – our curse –

so that he might bless us.

In the same way, we endure suffering for others –

bearing in our own bodies the judgment they deserved –

so that they might be blessed.

That’s the pattern that Paul has been teaching us –

from Christ, to us, to you.

The pattern of the Christian life is the shape of the cross.