

2 Corinthians 8:1-24
Every Little Helps (part 1)
Notes from a sermon preached at Christ Church Liverpool

It's typical isn't it. Your friend invites you to church for a guest service. They tell you that you'll be made welcome (which I hope you have been), that there'll be good coffee and cakes (which I promise there will be), that the different aspects of the meeting will be explained as we go along (which I think Maurice and Anna did very well so thanks for that). And then what's the sermon about? Money.

Typical. Churches are always banging on about money aren't they. With their thermometers by the front gate for the roof fund and their collection plates passed round during the meeting. Perhaps, like me, you've been to weddings where some minister like me asks, not once, but twice whether the wedding guests would be willing to contribute to some church fund or other; usually neglecting to mention the several hundred pounds the bride and groom have probably already shelled out to hire the church in the first place.

Add to that the fact that the more famous brands of church (the Roman Catholics and the Church of England in particular) have a reputation, which is, it must be said, largely unfounded, for being fabulously wealthy already, and you can see why people feel pretty cynical about churches and money.

Well in the fact of lots of bad publicity for churches, largely the fault of their own bad practice it must be said, I think it's time to return to what the founding document of every true church, the Bible, has to say about money.

And so we're going to look, this Sunday morning and next, at the most extensive treatment of the topic of money, and in particular, of Christian giving, to be found anywhere in the New Testament.

And the startling thing about what Paul teaches in these chapters is that everything about Christian giving and attitudes to money is governed by what God has already done in the lives of the people who give.

In these verse we're going to learn three effects that God's grace has in relation to money and we're going to think together about the implications of that for us; whether you're here this morning as a visitor or a committed member of this church...

1 God's grace makes you give away your money

What is this?

$$x = \frac{-b \pm \sqrt{b^2 - 4ac}}{2a}$$

The quadratic formula! For $ax^2 + bx + c = 0$, the value of x is given by...

Some people in the room probably loved the quadratic formula at school and have spent the rest of your life so far chasing down and solving ever more complicated formulae in your engineering degree or studies of chemistry or physics.

Other people in the room probably feel like your eyes glaze over as soon as anybody mentions the world formula and got through your GCSE maths by the simple but time-consuming expedient of doing every possible sum that could come up about 20 times till you'd memorized all the answers! Or perhaps you just gave up and did Art instead.

Well the apostle Paul starts this section of his letter with a formula that is much simpler to understand but also extremely surprising. Let's have a look at the formula for life in the churches of Macedonia (northern Greece to you and me):

Trial + Joy + poverty = wealth of generosity

These Christians, Paul says, were suffering terribly (whether specifically through persecution for being Christians or the normal hardships of life we don't know). But they were still joyful and so, despite their poverty they were incredibly generous; generous as if they were wealthy in fact.

How does Paul know? Because, v3, they gave appropriately to what they had and even, radically, beyond what they had, to a collection that Paul was making for the relief of Christian people many hundreds of miles away in the areas around Jerusalem.

They didn't do it because Paul made them. And they didn't do it to impress him. They did it by pleading with Paul for the privilege, the grace, of sharing with others and they did it understanding that their offering was first of all to God and only secondly to Paul and the Christian people who would actually end up with the money.

All of this, Paul says, is an effect of, v1, the grace of God. It is because God has given something undeserved to these Greek Christians that they have been stirred in their hearts to respond by giving away their hard earned cash.

What is that? What is the undeserved thing these Christians have been given that has so radically transformed their attitude to money from the norm we see in that, and in our, society?

Paul tells us the answer in v9: they have been given Jesus Christ. Jesus showed grace to these Christians by trading in his riches, the very riches of heaven itself, for poverty; the poverty of a life lived in very ordinary circumstances in 1st Palestine and, especially, the poverty of death and suffering. And the reason that showed grace is that Jesus' poverty and suffering and death enabled these people to know God for themselves.

Christian giving, you see, is not an attempt to earn the favour of God by doing a good work.

It isn't even paying God back for the gift of grace that he has given us in enabling us to know him through Jesus Christ.

Christian giving flows, Paul says, naturally from the fact that God has made us rich. And people who are aware of having great and undeserved wealth will give.

Just as Jesus Christ showed great grace in acting to end our spiritual poverty and bring us from standing under God's judgment to being able to stand in his glorious presence, so those whose lives have been touched by that grace will, inevitably, act to end the poverty of others and, especially here, other Christians.

So what does that mean for me and you here this morning? Well let me tease out two implications of this important teaching for us...

I'll start by thinking about what this means for you if you're not a Christian. It's quite simple really. If you're not a Christian you shouldn't be giving to Christian ministry, either to things which help spread the message about Jesus or which involve Christians trying to alleviate the spiritual or material poverty of others.

If you are here this morning and you do not consider yourself to be a Christian you are really, really welcome. And not just at a guest service but every week and any week. We want anybody who is

interested in what Christians believe, or who just wants to meet some new people, to feel free to turn up to what we do and see the Christian life in action.

But we do not want your money. That is the main reason why we do not have any sort of collection of money here at Christ Church. Because we don't want anybody who is a visitor to feel like they have to contribute.

And if you are not a Christian I want to actively discourage you from giving to Christian causes. Not because they are not good. They are good! But because if you give your money to them you could easily fall into the trap of deluding yourself that you are a good person and that, somehow, God owes you. That you have, effectively, bought yourself favour with God by your generosity.

But that would be a completely backwards understanding of what a Christian is! A Christian is, Paul says, someone who understands that Jesus Christ has given him or her spiritual life and a relationship with God through his death on the cross. A Christian is someone who trusts Jesus and receives that gift of eternal life by grace as something totally undeserved. A Christian is someone who then is transformed in their attitude to giving because they know what a wonderful thing it is to receive.

If you are here this morning and you are not a Christian nobody at this church wants your money. What we want is for you to receive for yourself the free gift of Jesus Christ.

But what about if you do consider yourself to be a Christian? Well in that case we want your cash!

Seriously, though, the implication of Paul's teaching here for Christians is that the grace, the good news, the gift of the gospel, the message about Jesus and the life we can have in him, must lead to us excelling, v7, in our giving.

Those Christians in Macedonia aren't mentioned by Paul because he wants to embarrass the Corinthian Christians into giving to his pet project. He's not trying to set up a "who can raise the most cash" competition.

He is saying that what the Macedonians were doing was a sign that they had been transformed by becoming Christians.

And if the Corinthians do not give, Paul hints, that is a sign that they have not received God's grace; that they are not really Christians.

To put it bluntly. If you call yourself a Christian but your Christian life does not extend to giving your money away you probably aren't a Christian at all.

It's a bit confusing that Paul says in v8 "I am not commanding you" but then appears to give them a command in v11 "Now finish the work."! So what is it? A command or not a command?

I think what Paul means, and this fits with very similar phrases he uses in 1 Corinthians if you want to look it up later, is that he doesn't have a command from the Lord Jesus Christ about exactly what they should do here. He has received no dream, vision or revelation from God. But he does, with all his authority as an apostle, a messenger from God with the good news about Jesus, tell them what they need to do.

In other words this is not a command directly from Christ but it is something that Paul insists that they have to do! What does that mean for us?

Well we have no apostles, no definitive authoritative messengers of Christ today. But Paul's command to the Corinthians wasn't tied to a particular situation. They were to give because giving is a response to God's grace in Christ.

So giving is a command for you and me today if we call ourselves Christian because our giving of money is a sign of God's grace. A sign that we really are Christian.

Now of course you could come back at me and say that lots of people give generously of their money who are not Christians. Well of course they do! And I'm not saying that giving money is a sufficient sign that you are following Jesus. But it is a necessary sign.

God's grace makes people give away their money. So people who don't give away their money demonstrate themselves to be untouched by God's grace.

2 God's grace makes you finish what you start

It seems that the particular problem for the church in Corinth was that they had started out with a commitment to give to Paul's poverty relief project but were now having second thoughts.

So Paul urges them that they need to match up, v11, their initial enthusiasm with their actual performance.

What matters, Paul says, is their willingness.

That, I think, is quite striking. Because we often assume that when we fail to do something we know

we ought to do, like giving, it's just our administrative incompetence, busyness or something that is the reason.

Paul begs to differ. If they are willing to give, he says, they will follow through and complete the job. V12 "If the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has." In other words if you are willing you WILL do the giving.

Paul states what I think we all really know to be true: in the end we do what we want to do. And if we don't do something that is within our power to do, the reason for that, is because it isn't really that important to us.

The effect of grace, Paul says, is to change what is really important to us. If you are a Christian then the effect of grace will be to make you finish what you start. So if you have just "not got round" to praying, reading your Bible or, particularly here, giving money as a Christian guess what? It reveals that those things don't matter that much to you. We can dress it up however we like with excuses about how busy we are (and I know I do that all the time) but the reason we don't do stuff is, in the end, because it's not that important to us.

Now obviously we dress up our lack of willingness in all sorts of different ways. Here's a list of excuses I have heard, and quite a few I've used myself, that I think are, finally, just an unwillingness to finish what I've started and that demonstrate that the gospel has not transformed me in the way that it ought to have:

a) "I would give if I could find a worthy cause!"

Often we kid ourselves with the excuse that the reason we're not giving more money than we are is because we haven't found something that is sufficiently worth giving to. If you have ever said that, and I know I have, can I say that that is totally pathetic.

I can think of about 20 Christian organisations off the top of my head that do amazing work relieving poverty and telling people about Jesus that could all do more work if only they had more money.

As a church we already give to many of them so if you're a Christian who's not sure what to do with your money just give some money to Christ Church and mark the cheque "missions" on the back and we'll give it to someone who'll use it.

b) "I'd love to give but I don't trust the church to

use my money well.”

I've heard lots of people use this reason for not giving to church; in fact I've heard it in all the churches I've ever been a member of including this one.

If you've ever said that let me just ask you to think about it for a minute. If you are a member or a committed regular at a church you are trusting the leaders of that church to teach you from the Bible the most important truths in the universe. You are, in a very real sense, entrusting your spiritual life into their hands. You are making that church your family and calling these people your brothers and sisters. You are submitting yourself to their discipline and asking them to hold you accountable for your Christian life. But you don't trust them to spend your money well?

If that's what you think it seems to me there are two possibilities. Either money is much more important in your life than it ought to be OR you really ought to leave your church right away!

It's worth noting, as we won't look at these verses in detail, that Paul set up the administration of the money he was collecting so that people couldn't use this excuse. In v16-24 he tells us how the money (cash obviously in those days) was to be collected by three trusted and godly men, one chosen by Paul and two by the churches, so that independence could be guaranteed.

And churches and Christian organisations should have similar procedures. So at CCL budgets, reports to members on what we've spent and on what, accounts to Charity Commission and companies house, auditing, two people signing cheques etc.

c) “I'd love to give but I just haven't got round to it.”

There's no denying that some of us find administrative tasks much easier than other do. So for some filling in a standing order form or writing a cheque is really pretty simple; for others it represents summing up all our courage and sitting down at a desk with a pen!

But I think that Paul would not be impressed with this excuse. What would he say? Finish what you started! If you really have the desire, if God's grace is moving you to give, you will get the job done.

Eg giving to church. Failed to fill in standing order? Take more cash out and bring it on a Sunday and give it to the church treasurer!

Don't hear people saying “yeah well I would have eaten this week but it was just too complicated to get the cash out to go to the supermarket so I've fasted all week” do you?!

Well no doubt we have all sorts of other excuses as well – I know I do. But, if you are a Christian here this morning, you need to repent of those excuses and embrace what Paul teaches – God's grace makes us finish what we start.

3 God's grace makes us love equity

The NIV, our church Bible, unfortunately makes Paul's economic policy for Christians sound like a sort of proto-communism. His desire, it says, v13, is that there might be “equality” – which sounds like he wants everybody to have the same.

There are, as communists have discovered, lots of problems with the idea of equality. And in fact in classic communism it was how much you needed not strict equality that was aimed for. I'm sure you can imagine the problems if someone tried to set up a system of strict equality in a church!

Fortunately, however, that's not what Paul wants. What he says he is looking for between Christians is not equality, but “equity” or fairness. That's the point of his quotation from the book of Exodus talking about the manna, the miracle bread that God provided to his people in the desert. It's not that everybody had the same; it's that nobody went short and nobody had excessive amounts. There was neither too much nor too little.

And Paul sees the age the Corinthian Christians lived in; which is exactly the same, theologically speaking, as the age we live in, as a second Exodus. Like the ancient Israelites we have been rescued by God – they from slavery, we from slavery to sin and death. But like the ancient Israelites we haven't reached our destination yet – they the promised land of Canaan, we the new heavens and the new earth. So on the journey just as they had equity in what was provided for them so Christians are to have equity.

In other words Paul isn't trying to rob the Corinthian church so that Christians in Jerusalem can live the high life and swan about in swanky hotels and drive Aston Martins. He wants the abundance that the Corinthians have to supply the “needs” of these other Christians. He wants equity, fairness, just like there was in the days of the Exodus.

But there is a critical difference. Because whereas

during the Exodus God enforced equity by giving food that went rotten if you tried to hoard it, now God relies on the transforming power of his grace to make Christians choose to live in fairness.

For the Corinthian Christians of 2000 years ago that meant sending some of their money to Christians in Jerusalem who were, probably literally, starving.

But what does it mean for us? What would the behaviour of a bunch of Christians, of us if you are a Christian here this morning, of this church look like if we were to value equity, as Paul says we must?

Well it's hard to say exactly. Because we live in an age of even greater disparity of wealth than Paul did. We happen to live in a country where, pretty much, nobody starves to death and where nobody has to go without a roof over their head at night and clothes to wear; though sadly for many complicated reasons some people do live without those things.

But around the world there are countries where the vast majority of the population, including millions of our Christian brothers and sisters live without life's basic essentials – go and read about Zimbabwe or Congo if you don't believe me!

What should valuing equity mean? Well I don't think the Bible says we must or must not have particular possessions or particular luxuries. I don't think that Paul wants the Corinthians to live in a state where the rich and poor level out so everybody has exactly the same amount of money. I don't think there's anything wrong with nice cars or nice houses or nice holidays or good meals out or flat screen TVs or i-phones or good clothes.

As I say the Bible is not prescriptive about what Christians have or what they should give. There is no figure here. There is no 10% or 2% or 30%. There is just giving, v12, in accordance with what you have and giving readily.

So I am not going to tell you any answers. In fact I'm not sure that I know the answers to these questions. In fact I'm sure I don't know the answers! But I have been challenged by this passage that I need to ask them of myself and of you...

- Is it equitable that we get takeaways at least every week when people in other churches in the world have nothing to eat?
- Is it fair that a Christian should have a second home when there are Christians without a home?

- Is it just that I should have two TVs in my house when there are Christians who do not have a tap in their home, or even their village?
- It is reasonable that I should spend more on a Premiership season ticket than 4 billion people have as an entire income for a year?

Like I say I don't know the answers to those questions. But I do know that if we just say that the questions are too hard and we don't want to even think about them we are showing that we have no interest at all in equity; and that is a very strong sign that we are not really followers of the God who is the just judge of all.

You might, I suppose, wonder why my questions ask mainly about our responsibilities to Christians. Are we not to care about the billions of unbelievers in the world?

Well yes I think the Bible is clear that we are to care for them. But here in 2 Corinthians Paul's focus is on our attitude to other Christians in our world. And if we cannot even bring ourselves to be concerned about people who we will spend eternity with there's not much hope of us being concerned for anyone else is there?

God's grace is an amazingly powerful thing. When you receive his free gift by trusting in Jesus Christ it transforms your life and your wallet.

God's grace makes you give away your money. It makes you finish what you start and it makes you value equity.

And any one of us who calls ourselves a Christian does not give proportionately and generously is denying the gospel's power in our lives.

So if you are here this morning and you do not call yourself a Christian we do not want your money. We want you to know that Jesus Christ became poor so that you could be rich. And we want you to embrace that wealth by putting your trust in him.

And if you are a Christian here this morning I want you to ask whether the grace of God you have embraced in the gospel is really operating in your life in a visible and powerful way in relation to your money. And if it isn't I ask you to repent and come back to Christ who has made you rich so that your life, by grace, can start to look like his.

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January 2009*