

THE APOSTLE PAUL ASKS FOR MONEY
2 Corinthians 8:7-15
November 11, 2018

Forbes magazine estimates that there are 1,125 billionaires in the world. That's three times as many as three years ago, meaning that there are three times as many people that others love to hate—what with their Telecom takeovers and their oil-sheik daddies.

Hearing some rags-to-riches tales makes it a bit easier to accept the news that some blue collar blokes are now white-collar billionaires. But is there anything that would cause us to say, "They deserve all that money"? Only one thing could help for sure: Ridiculous wealth seems justified when matched by jaw-dropping charitable giving.

Few complain about Oprah's \$2.5 billion net worth. She was born to unmarried teenage parents—her mom a maid and her dad a coal miner. Growing up in rural Mississippi, her mother was so poor that her grandmother made dresses for Oprah from potato sacks. In other words, Oprah's ghetto to glam rise is as unlikely as it is meteoric.

But the striking difference between Oprah and some of her billionaire compatriots is her unmatched reputation for generosity. She is a charter member of the new philanthropists. She rewarded her entire staff and their families (over 1,000 people) with paid Hawaiian vacations. She's funded the college costs for 250 African American men. She covers the administrative costs of Oprah's Angel Network so that 100 percent of the hundreds of millions in donations go toward justice issues and education for the world's poorest. Oprah has topped the celebrity gives 3 out of 4 years, giving 10 times the next biggest giver.

Quite simply, Oprah remembers her roots. She gives to causes that should have been there to take care of kids like her. She's *the* cultural model of moving from poverty to riches to poverty alleviation.

How many of us have gushed with philanthropic dreams when seeing the Power Ball jackpot total. What was the last one? \$700 million dollars? How many have told God that if God made us rich, we would take care of the needs of countless others?

Well, Paul tells the Corinthians that they should dig into their purses. Let's be clear. There are many ways we can give to the Lord's work, and to those who are in need. I'm thinking here about our spiritual gifts, our skills, our talents, our prayers and our time.

But Paul is not asking the Corinthian church in this case to donate their spiritual gifts, their skills, their prayers or their time. Paul is asking for money. Cold, hard cash. A real follow-through-with-it pledge.

So how rich is "rich"? And how needy is "in need"? Have we missed the possibility that God has already put us in a position of provision? In other words, do we need a handout or a wallet out? Are we called to be donees or donors?

This is the theme of 2 Corinthians 8. Despite their poverty, the Macedonian churches, that's the Philippians incidentally, had generously funded the church in Corinth (vv.1-6). So now the Apostle is asking for money. He's asking the Corinthian church, recent recipients of charitable giving, to return the favor on behalf of the church in Jerusalem (v. 7).

On the surface, this text is about giving. But at a deeper level it's about perspective. Does the Corinthian church get it? Do the Corinthian Christians remember where they came from and where they are now? Is their love genuine? Do they have a healthy perspective of how much they actually have compared to others?

Paul gives them reasons to give. As far as Paul saw it, there were two main reasons that Corinth needed to remember their roots and give:

First, their congregation was *blessed by those who gave to help them* in their hour of need. When Macedonia had more than Corinth, they bankrolled the church there. Now Jerusalem was in greater need than Corinth and it was time to share the blessing.

But Paul wasn't pulling a Robin Hood fundraiser. Historically, their abundance was NOT abundance as most would define it, especially given the commercial boom of their trade city. Think of those today who are just squeaking by, some in this very room, while corporations and the very rich get fatter and richer due to the recent so-called tax cuts.

But then we can look around us and see homeless, and families who live by getting food out of restaurant garbage bins. That happens, doesn't it? And here we are in abundance.

Paul was appealing to financial comparison, too. Regardless of what they had, it was at least more than the Jerusalem church had. They were very poor. Desperately poor.

I need to say something about the Jerusalem church's need. Believers in Christ has been kicked out of the synagogues, thus being cut off from all sources of income, because the synagogue was where the laborers connected with the folks who needed labor. In a lot of ways, the synagogue was the union hall and temporary labor office too.

And another thing about this offering. It would prove to the Jerusalem Christians that the Gentile Christians, who are supplying their needs in their time of need, are as fully and really Christ followers as Jewish Christ followers. (The Jewish church hadn't thought this was true yet.) So the offering was Paul's

attempt at unity of the Christian church throughout the known world. It was important evangelically as well as practically.

The point is that those who have more than others, share with those who have less. Period.

Paul calls it a fair balance (v.13).

I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of equality your abundance at the present time should supply their want, so that their abundance may supply your want, that there may be equality.

I've said that not many of us feel rich, but I think we know the plight of the poorest of the poor. Let's play Paul's money comparison game. One estimate of global household income put the median at \$10,000, when rounded UP. Perhaps all households which live on less than \$10,000 per year should put their hands out, and those that live on more than \$10,000 per year should put their wallets out.

The point is to jar our perspective a bit. Should we be hands out or wallets out...and compared with whom? Are we Corinth or Jerusalem? If given only two options, are we rich or poor?

College. Grad school. Unemployment. First baby. Job numbers up, but wages flat. We can all point to times in our lives when we've had less than we enjoy now. Paul is saying to Corinth and to us, "Remember your roots!" Remember your times of need so you will remember to meet the needs of others.

But there is a second reason, Paul says, why Corinth needs to remember their roots, and this applies to all of us, regardless of the size of our bank accounts: *the example of Jesus Christ.*

"For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, so that by His poverty you might become rich" (v.9).

Jesus was “rich” according to Paul. He must be referring to the pre-existent Christ as God and God alone. This Christ gave up what He had—His indivisible deity—to become what He would forevermore be: both human and divine. He humbled Himself, unto death...death on a cross, no less. Jesus embodied this voluntary experiential poverty so that spiritual poverty could be turned into spiritual richness.

Our spiritual roots lie in the impoverishment of Christ on our behalf. That makes freely giving our resources to the needs of others deeply theological. It’s incarnational – that is, it *embodies* the force and direction of Jesus. It is pure gospel. It re-enacts our spiritual story through fiscal action.

Paul reminds the Corinthian church, not only of how others have helped them in the past, but of how Jesus Christ himself is the supreme example of the kind of sacrifice to which Paul is now calling them. How then could they refuse to send an offering to those in need in Jerusalem?

Paul asked for money then, and preachers have been doing it ever since. So why is this necessary? Why do we need someone to meddle with our money? Why do we need to continue preaching about money and generosity in our rich churches?

For the same reason Paul did. He knew that it’s hard to visualize the need of others unless someone draws us a picture. The phrase “out of sight, out of mind” describes most of our perspectives on our church’s financial situation.

When one shakes a rattle in front of a baby, the baby may coo with delight. But tuck that rattle behind the back and the baby literally thinks it disappeared forever. Developmentally, babies do not yet grasp object permanence—the idea that something out of sight still exists. That’s why when mom and dad leave the room, a screaming baby may feel as though they are gone forever.

Most people lack a similar sense of object permanence with regard to money. The sins of comfort, self-justification, and plain old-fashioned greed cause most of us to forget how *dramatically* rich we may be. We treat the needs of others as out of sight, out of mind. We forget our roots like blue-collar billionaires who don't give to the poor.

To shake up our financial perspectives a bit, here are some questions we can ask in connection with this text:

- How would our life be experientially poorer without Christ?
- What percentage of our annual income goes toward needs vs. wants?
- Are we entitled to fund our wants above others' needs, and why?
- What is just one area of financial need to which we can give more generously?

Our enjoyment of all this may be akin to the pleasure one derives from sitting in a dentist's chair for a root canal. But here's the good news. The good news is that *we are blest when we give*. Most people who give to relieve the plight and distress of others report that they feel very good about it. They feel a sense of spiritual wholeness and satisfaction. When Paul addressed the Elders at Ephesus, he closed his message with a word about giving, and cited the words of Jesus Himself: "In all this I have given you [says Paul] an example that by such work we must support the weak, remembering the word of the Lord Jesus, for He Himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive'" (Acts 20:36).

Want to be blessed? Want to be assured of God's love? Give.

Amen.