

“... there should be ... a fair balance between your present abundance and their need.”

Today’s epistle lesson is part of Paul’s second letter to the church in Corinth. Although Paul had founded this church, the largely Gentile Christ-followers there no longer held Paul in the same high esteem as when Paul had been with them. Judaizers had moved in, Jewish Christians who believed all people must become Jewish to be Christian.

THAT was the big controversy in the early church, between Jewish and Gentile Christians. Jewish Christians were undergoing major loss of the worship they loved. Gentile Christians offered their worship a future, but at the cost of changing their liturgy to the point their worship might have felt unrecognizable.

Paul’s letter to the Corinthians urged them to complete their generous financial pledge to the Christian church in Jerusalem. Apparently, the Corinthians had fallen behind in giving that they had promised. Paul was worried they had reneged on their pledge altogether.

Paul spent a lot of time in his letters to all the churches in Asia Minor (in other words, to all the Gentile churches) bolstering their support for The Collection. We don’t know exactly what Paul’s motives might have been.

- Perhaps Paul had a social ministry agenda. The people in the Jerusalem church were impoverished by famine and persecution. So maybe Paul was motivated by great empathy and concern for the poor among their fellow Christians.
- Perhaps Paul had a strategic agenda. Early Jewish Christians often harbored a negative concept of Gentiles, even fellow Christian Gentiles. So maybe Paul wanted to use help from the Gentiles Christians for the Jewish ones to bring about Christian unity.
- Perhaps Paul had a theological motive. Several passages of Hebrew scripture (such as Isaiah 2:2) suggest that Gentiles would stream to Jerusalem as a sign of the last days. So maybe Paul was trying to keep the new Christ-movement AND Jews in the path of scripture.
- Perhaps Paul wanted to thank the Mother Church in Jerusalem for the money they had spent in telling the Gentiles about Christ Jesus when they had funded missionary travels. So maybe Paul wanted the Gentile Christians to show their gratitude by repaying essential kindness for essential kindness.



Maybe Paul had all these objectives in mind when he advocated for, begged, chided, pleaded, and guilt-ed the Gentile Christians to give money to the church in Jerusalem. Whatever his motives, The Collection clearly was very important to Paul. He even suffered for advocating it.

To say The Collection was unpopular is an understatement. There were riots over Paul's insistence on giving money to the very people who ostracized them. One writer pointed out that Gentile Christians undoubtedly knew they were funding meals at tables and in synagogues that they, themselves, would not be allowed to participate in. This would be like pledging to a diocese that wouldn't let any of us worship in its churches. Or maybe this would be like collaborating with a choir that sees itself as better than us. Something like that, God forbid.

The Jewish Christians weren't any happier with The Collection. They arrested Paul in Jerusalem, in part because of the Gentile money he brought them. Talk about a unity-buster!

But Paul was a master of persuasion. Today we heard his argument to the Corinthians for fulfilling their pledge. He bypassed the reasons I speculated about that might have motivated HIM. Instead, he worked on persuasions to motivate THEM.

Paul's argument was a "doozy," too, "supremely and brilliantly effective." He told the Corinthians that the Macedonian Church nearby had joyously given a huge amount. And they had! Paul told the Corinthians that he didn't want them to be embarrassed by having their poorer neighbors out-give them. This is like the motivation colleges use when they publish their donor lists and amounts. Ego pressure!

But this argument isn't what made Paul's encouragement so spectacular. He moved into the theological realm, going "spiritual" by reminding them that Christ Jesus gave all he had, in heaven and on earth, gave all for them and for us. As Christ-followers, Paul said, we should follow Jesus' example. Gratitude pressure!

But, lest we get worried that we are required to "go all the way with Jesus," financially or to the cross, Paul assured the Corinthians they should strive for balance. We are to give from our abundance to meet the needs of others who are in need. Joyfully, Paul said, in thanksgiving for all God has given us. Happiness pressure!

This lesson usually gets preached only in stewardship season. We preachers start with this epistle lesson when we ask you to pledge money to sustain the work God has given us to do here in this time and from this place. But that's not why I chose this lesson to reflect on today.

We—Church of the Resurrection—are not financially rich like we perceive the large churches to be. YOU, individually—WE, individually—are rich; we just pretend we are not by pointing to people with

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more resources than we have. As Church of the Resurrection, though, what we are rich in most is heart and hope.

Heart is care for others, empathy, a burning desire to share what we have. Like the two tons of food we shared in the Shenandoah Valley last weekend. Hope is faith, faith in God, faith in Christ Jesus, faith in each other. We have faith that we will have a future. And not just any future, but a future that is better than our past, a future even more fantastic and desirable than what time and change have taken from us.

Paul saw this, that giving beyond ourselves secures “us.” Paul knew that the only sure way to keep what we have is to give what we have away. Paul knew these things because they are the essence of “resurrection.”

So, listen to the heart of today’s epistle lesson according to a paraphrase called *The Message*:

“Your heart’s been in the right place all along. You’ve got what it takes to finish it up, so go to it. Once the commitment is clear, you do what you can, not what you can’t. The heart regulates the hands. This isn’t so others can take it easy while you sweat it out. No, you’re shoulder to shoulder with them all the way, your surplus matching their deficit, their surplus matching your deficit. In the end, you come out even.”