

# BaptistWay Bible Series for July

## 8: Giving themselves first

June 28, 2012

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This week's lesson examines three notable texts which teach generosity. These focal texts derive from the Apostle Paul's correspondence with the Corinthian church. Paul is famous for his doctrinal and ethical teachings, therefore, his encouragements toward generosity often appear as fascinating surprises to those who discover them.

Paul's concept of material generosity is based upon Exodus 16:18 and quoted in 2 Corinthians 8:15. The point is God's blessings are meant to be shared. Paul's rationale for sharing is found in Romans 16:27. He points out that Gentiles should share from their material abundance with the Palestinian church which has graciously shared from its spiritual abundance—the good news of Jesus and products of its lengthy spiritual heritage in covenant with the Lord.

A remarkable opportunity arose in the Christian world of Paul's day. Jewish and Gentile relations were strained within the early church. One way to ease tensions between the two groups was to lead Gentile Christians to present an impressive love gift of material support to the Jerusalem church which suffered from the effects of the famine in Palestine. Appealing to generosity and even duty (Romans 16:27), Paul instructed his people to collect funds to show solidarity with their Jewish brethren.

1 Corinthians 16 contains the greetings section of the epistle. The body of the epistle, containing its message, ended with chapter 15. Now miscellaneous matters are mentioned, the first of which is Paul's concern for the famine relief fund. Verse 1 mentions the "collection for the saints."

This must have been the shorthand reference to the famine relief fund for Palestinian Christians. The underlying Greek word is “saints.” This is an example of applied ethics. Galatians 3:28 teaches in Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile. All believers are sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:26). Therefore, famine relief was a matter of assisting fellow saints, or believers, through a rough time in their lives.

Verse 1 states Paul had given similar instructions to the Galatian churches. Paul recently had traveled through Galatia prior to visiting Ephesus where he wrote 1 Corinthians. 2 Corinthians adds the Macedonian churches also participated in famine relief. Paul was organizing a massive collection.

The second verse refers to the first day of the week. We often must remind ourselves that Sunday is the first week day. Sunday was a regular business day. It was also the day Christians worshipped. Thus, Paul indicated his readers should collect for famine relief at worship services. His instruction that this collection be completed before his arrival likely meant that he did not want to be involved in fundraising.

This is similar to the sentiments of the apostles in Acts 6:1-4 who delegated the administration of financial matters so they could devote attention to the higher disciplines of prayer and the ministry of God’s word. Paul likely had similar sentiments. An apostle must not be concerned with strategies of raising monies when capable, wise congregants can effectively handle the matter.

Verses 3-4 make provision for conveying the gift. When the time arrived to send the collection, letters and carefully selected emissaries would accompany it. Letters would present the gift and explain its use. The letters also would serve as accountability instruments for those carrying the gift.

2 Corinthians 8 opens with a discussion of the famine offering. Macedonia was a resource-rich province, but its churches faced the stress of

persecution and were much poorer than the massive Corinthian church which resided in a major shipping hub. The Macedonian churches (Thessalonica, Philippi, Berea, Amphipolis, etc.) responded to the famine relief effort with great sacrifice. Thus Paul hoped to inspire the Corinthians to step up their participation in the famine offering. To do so, he wrote this classic inspiration on generous giving.

Verses 1, 6 and 7 emphasize the offering as an expression of grace. The basis of generosity is grace. The famine offering provides a gracious parallel to God's gift of salvation through Jesus (v. 9). Generous giving from one's abundance is one way believers can imitate their gracious Lord.

The Macedonians excelled in their generosity (v. 5). The Lord's example was their standard (v. 5). Now the Corinthians received the challenge. Verse 10 suggests the Corinthian church originated the idea to send famine relief. Now Paul encouraged them to complete their effort (v. 11).

Paul concludes teaching about generosity by saying equality is the guiding factor. The giving party (v. 15, "he who gathered much") should not have to carry the whole burden of supporting the needy. The needy (v. 15, "he who gathered little") should be busy doing the best they can to support themselves. Providing the difference between "little" and "sufficient" is the focus of generosity.

2 Corinthians 9 returns to the topic of generosity. Several principles of generosity are set out. First, generosity operates like abundant, not sparing, sowing and reaping (v. 6). Second, generosity is best practiced by willing participation (v. 7). Third, God empowers generosity so it is abundantly effective (vv. 8-11).

The intended outcomes of generosity also are noted. One, needs are supplied (v. 12). Two, believers are caused to give praise and thanks to the Lord (vv. 12-13). Three, the faith of the giver is "proven" by "obedience" to

the “law” of grace which directs interaction in God’s kingdom (v. 13). Fourth, the giver has practiced grace through their spiritual giftedness (vv. 14-15).