

# OpenTheo

## July 25th: 2 Corinthians 8 & Mark 1:14-20

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The theological underpinnings of Paul's charitable work. The call of Peter, Andrew, James, and John.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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## Transcript

2 Corinthians chapter 8. 1 Corinthians 8. 2 Corinthians 8. 2 Corinthians 8. 2 Corinthians 8. 2 Corinthians 8. 2 Corinthians 8. 2 Corinthians 8. 2 Corinthians 8. 2 Corinthians 8. 2 Corinthians 8. 2 Corinthians 8. 2 Corinthians 8. 2 Corinthians 8. 2 Corinthians 8. 2 Corinthians 8. Paul has been emphasising his ministry, but now speaks of a ministry that the Corinthians can exercise as a sort of a return. The Corinthians can participate in the ministry of reconciliation that Paul has spoken of by giving to the Jewish Christians in such a manner. The theme of abundance and the overflowing of abundance has been mentioned by Paul in a few contexts already.

In chapter 1 verse 5, in chapter 3 verse 9, in chapter 4 verse 15. It seems to be a characteristic feature of the gospel, and now he calls for the Corinthians to express this

in their giving. He has spoken of the Corinthians' zeal and earnestness, as reported by Titus, and now he calls for those traits to be expressed in the collection.

The theme of glory has been prominent to this point in the letter, and now he speaks of the collection as something that will bring glory to Christ. Finally, the multifaceted theme of grace and gift pervades this chapter, as it has the rest of the letter. The collection is a very concrete expression of grace in action.

Our Lord preached a message of good news to the poor, yet for many of his followers today, the gospel message and Christian concern for the poor stand in uncertain and uneasy relation. Although few would deny that Christians have no special duty to the poor, maintaining this duty in the context of a full-bodied Christian faith has proven surprisingly challenging. For some, the Christian message that summons people to the works of mercy can be reduced to a vanishing mediator for a generic message of social justice and welfare.

Christ's teaching and example may be invoked to underwrite and inspire the moral fervency of a secularised social activism, yet in the final analysis, Christ may prove dispensable for it. This is typically coupled with a shift from Christ to the government as the agent that must effect the awaited kingdom's advent, and from the church to secular society as its focal community. Christ ceases to be set forth as the King of the coming kingdom, the one to whom every knee must bow.

He is diminished in stature to the level of a mere moral teacher, exemplar, and vocal advocate for social justice. A smile of universal benevolence lingers as, like the Cheshire cat, Christ himself gradually disappears. In other quarters, concerns about the wayward trajectory of a social gospel, coupled with wariness about the overemphasis upon works among Protestants, have led many conservative Christians theologically to minimise the importance of Christian charity.

Lest it come to displace Christ in his centrality, Christian charity must be handled as a matter of secondary, peripheral, or even extraneous concern. Yet when we read passages such as 2 Corinthians 8-9, a vision of Christian practice emerges for which the works of mercy operate in a close and inseparable relation with the specific claims of the Christian gospel. The modern reader of the Pauline epistles, who hasn't paid sufficient attention to the Book of Acts, can easily fall into the trap of regarding the Apostle Paul principally as a thinker, whose travels, church planting, and charitable work were largely incidental to his theological labours and thought.

That the Pauline corpus consists of occasional letters to particular parties is also often a fact passed over without reflection. Yet both a careful reading of the epistles and of the Book of Acts reveals that the various dimensions of the Apostle Paul's labours were firmly bound up together. As the Apostle to the Gentiles, one of Paul's chief goals was to establish the union of Jewish and Gentile Christians in a single household, functioning

according to a single economy of grace.

His theological work consistently undergirds and propels his practical labours. Collecting for the poor, in particular the poor in Jerusalem, was one of the things that Paul was charged to do by the lead apostles, the pillars of the church, in Jerusalem, in Galatians 2, verses 7-10. On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised, for he who worked through Peter for his apostolic ministry to the circumcised worked also through me for mine to the Gentiles, and when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised, only they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.

Whether in letter writing, travelling and missionary work, dispatching fellow workers to various parts of the church, or in the raising of charitable funds for Christians in Jerusalem, the Apostle Paul tirelessly laboured to forge a unified economy and communication network between churches across the Roman Empire. In the circulation of Pauline epistles, for instance, specific churches passed on both the revelation given to them and their examples to other churches. Born by messengers who would serve the receiving church in the name of the sending church and enjoy hospitality in return, you should also notice the way that Paul will consistently refer to other churches as examples to the churches to whom he is writing.

Here it is the example of the Macedonian Christians that Paul brings forward for the Corinthians to follow. As Paul encourages the Corinthian Christians in their raising of a financial gift for the Christians in Jerusalem, he does what he does in places such as Romans chapter 15, verses 25-27. He presents a rich theological and rhetorically shrewd rationale for his charitable work.

He mobilises key themes of his epistles to encourage those receiving them to these endeavours. Verse 7 exhibits some of this as Paul frames the gift for the Jerusalem Christians in terms of the grace that the Corinthians have themselves received. Especially striking is the way that Paul presents the giving that he is calling the Corinthians to, a simultaneously divine gift that he is desiring to see them abound in, a gift of which the Macedonian churches are exemplary recipients, which he emphasises at the start of the chapter in verses 1 and 2. In their practice of liberality the Corinthians will receive the divine gift of giving.

Here we see a logic that is more fully developed in the chapter that follows, where Paul speaks of God's abounding gift of his grace as that which makes possible our own liberality, by giving us to participate in his own giving. We should bear in mind here the way that the gifts of the Spirit in Pauline theology function as divine gifts by which the

members of Christ's body are given to represent and participate in God's gift of the Holy Spirit to the whole. In such a manner the liberal giver is the one who most fully receives.

This paradox is characteristically Pauline and perhaps especially fitting in the book of 2 Corinthians, within which a power in weakness paradox is foregrounded in later chapters. Paul proceeds to speak of Christ, who was rich, becoming poor so that through his poverty we might become rich. The relationship between poverty and riches in this statement also has elements of paradox, akin to those of James 1 9-10.

The poor brother boasts in his exaltation and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. The heavenly riches that we have been given are discovered through a spiritual orientation that most readily grows in the soil of material poverty, what Oliver O'Donovan terms a dependence upon God and openness to his kingdom. God's riches are received in spiritual poverty, something which the puffed-up Corinthians often failed to exhibit.

Paul's purposeful avoidance of command in favour of exaltation, as we see in verse 8, is also both typical and noteworthy. For the Corinthians' act of giving to have its appropriate character, it must be done by their own volition, not under any compulsion or burdensome obligation. Paul is pointedly not imposing a tax, but is rather encouraging the Corinthians to come into the fuller possession of a gift and to follow the example of Christ, so that the fruitfulness of their gratitude and the abundance of their giving will redound to God's own glory.

Paul then seeks to summon the Corinthians into the freedom of the abundant gift of Christ, in the full receipt of which they would overflow in joyful giving. As elsewhere, Paul's conviction that the Spirit fulfils the law in the hearts of Christians leads him to adopt a rhetoric of persuasion and exaltation, appealing to the will liberated by the Spirit, for which the paths of the law's fulfilment will be the paths of freedom. The notion of equality in verse 14 should probably be read against a Greek background, where it was connected both with accounts of friendship and with politics.

In the first place, in ministering to the needs of the Judean Christians, the Corinthians would be expressing the reality of the fellowship of the saints, as we see in verse 4. In the second place, the ministering of the Gentile Christians to Jewish Christians in Jerusalem would be a striking political gesture, of which L.L. Wellborn observes, the politically superior inhabitants of a Roman colony must demonstrate their submission to conquered provincials in Jerusalem, in order to achieve equality. The equality advocated for here, as in the case of the oneness spoken of in Galatians 3.28, there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus, shouldn't be confused for some generalized egalitarian commitment on Paul's part. It is an equality grounded firmly in the event of Christ's action, and in the new reality of the Church, not in some liberal convictions that Paul holds about human

persons and societies as such.

The fact that the Jerusalem Christians are to be the recipients of the gift is not insignificant either. The equality that Paul calls for relates to the reciprocity described in Romans 15.25-27. At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints, for Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem, for they were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings.

In the giving of such gifts, the bond between Jews and Gentiles in the Church and in the Gospel would be strengthened and a fellowship galvanized through the reciprocal ministry of the gifts of Christ. This giving is a decidedly theological act then. Paul's reference to Exodus 16 is arresting in this context for many reasons.

Exodus 16.18 reads, But when they measured it with an omer, whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack, each of them gathered as much as he could eat. This verse comes from the account of God's providential gift of manna to the children of Israel during the Exodus, and Paul's use of it in this context is quite remarkable. Our initial impression might be that Paul's use of the verse is somewhat at odds with its original context.

In Exodus, the verse relates to the perfect sufficiency of God's provision for the needs of each of the Israelite families. However, in 2 Corinthians 8, Paul uses the same verse to bolster his appeal to the Corinthians, the ones who have much, to give to the Jerusalem Christians, the ones who have little. The equality is not immediately established in the divine act of provision itself, but will only be realised through the participation of the Corinthians in ministering to the Jewish Christians.

This, however, fits with the greater themes of these chapters. The gift and provision of God is to be ministered and enjoyed through and in the gifts of his people to each other. The allusion to the gift of manna might also excite other connections in the minds of the heroes of this passage.

It relates the early Christian church to the Exodus generation, and implicitly situates them within the Messianic age, as Wellborn suggests. As they are being led out of the Egypt of sin and death by Christ, they are being fed by him. A further possible connection would be to the celebration of the supper.

The Christians sharing in the bread of the supper corresponded with the Israelites feeding on the manna. However, while the bread of the manna was gathered in an equal manner, the bread of the supper is to be distributed in an equal manner. By means of the manna allusion, Paul may subtly conceptually relate the supper to the distribution of resources between Christians in the ministry of gifts.

Note also the references to communion, *koinonia*, in verse 4. Perhaps there is some indication here that for Paul, the supper must be validated in the practice of the works of mercy and ministry in the body of Christ. If you are sharing the bread and the wine with your brother or sister in Christ, you ought also to share with them from your abundance when they find themselves in need. Although contemporary Christian approaches to charity are often only loosely expressive of deeper Christian theological convictions, and thus at risk of either displacing or eclipsing them, or being marginalized for the sake of them, Paul's theology manifests no such weakness.

Rather, Paul's exhortation to the Corinthians is grounded in, and their practice will be an affirmation of, both the union of Jews and Gentiles in one body in Christ, and the shape of the Christ event. It is expressive of their situation in the new exodus of the Messianic age, a blessed participation in the liberality of God's own gift in Christ, and an enjoyment of the freedom of the will liberated by the Spirit. Rediscovering these foundations of Christian charity in the Gospel enables us to rediscover the significance of the works of mercy, as witnesses to the truth of what God has done in Christ, and also revelatory of the beauty of the form of God's work in Christ.

Whether Christians sideline the work of mercy in order to maintain the primacy of the Gospel, or pursue them in ways that uproot them from the uniqueness of the Gospel message, the New Testament teaching on the subject is being abandoned in these cases. However, in the faithful exercise of Christian charity, we bear testimony to the abundant and overflowing gift that God has given us in Christ, and we also testify to the freedom that we are granted to participate in His liberality. In societies defined by the opposition between rich and poor, we bear testimony to divine riches received in spiritual poverty, calling the poor to the spiritual orientation appropriately corresponding to their material condition, and the rich, who almost all of us are, both their responsibility to, and their need to follow the example of the poor.

In atomised societies we bear testimony also to a social body that crosses class and socio-economic boundaries, it holds people together in a loving communion of mutual service and regard, and also unites them in a desire to serve those without. In these respects, Christian charity far exceeds secular charity in its political consequences. In it is disclosed an event that precedes and exceeds any human initiative or instigation, a divine beneficence that has burst forth in history, and which is beyond all containment.

It reveals a new economy that escapes the logic of scarcity, a paradoxical gift which is received in the giving. It arises from a new liberating impulse that is the Spirit's work within us. It subverts the hierarchical opposition between rich and poor that secular charity all too often reinforces, and it binds giver and receiver together in a communion of reciprocal service.

Practised faithfully, a pale reflection of a kingdom beyond all earthly kingdoms can be

seen within it. A question to consider, what are some respects in which the vision of charity that Paul presents here shows up the failures and weaknesses of dominant visions of charity within modern society? Mark chapter 1 verses 14 to 20 Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God and saying, Passing alongside the sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, And I will make you become fishers of men.

And immediately they left their nets and followed him. And going on a little farther he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending the nets. And immediately he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants and followed him.

In Mark chapter 1 Jesus begins his Galilean ministry, which takes up the first eight chapters of the book. While John the Baptist had carried out much of his ministry in Judea, Jesus starts off as a Galilean figure. Jesus' message concerns the gospel of God, the good news that God is coming to reign.

The long-awaited time has come at last, God's promised reign is about to arrive, and people must repent and believe the joyful tidings. Like John before him, Jesus is described as one proclaiming. He is a herald bearing a message of something about to happen in history.

Unlike John, however, he isn't just a forerunner, but the one announcing and bringing the expected rule of God. God is now fulfilling his purpose in their days, and they must be ready, repenting of their sins as a people and responding faithfully to the proclamation being given to them. Jesus passes alongside the Sea of Galilee and calls Simon and Andrew, followed by James and John.

These are the three core disciples, with Andrew being the fourth disciple in the typical ordering. They are all fishermen from the north of the country, not the most promising material with which to start a religious movement. They are beside the Sea of Galilee, and the Sea of Galilee is very important in Matthew, Mark and John in particular.

Luke speaks about it as the Lake of Gennesaret, and then later on talks about a sea in the Book of Acts, in the case of the Mediterranean. But in the other gospels, the Sea of Galilee is very important both within the narrative and also symbolically. The Sea of Galilee is a focal point for Jesus' ministry, a point in terms of which the nature of his ministry ought to be understood.

However, we never read of Jesus visiting Sephorus or Tiberias, which were the main Hellenistic cities in the region. Jesus' ministry, although in a region with lots of Gentile and Hellenized populations, is overwhelmingly a ministry to Jews. Simon and Andrew are both Greek names, which suggests perhaps that like other Jews in the area, they had

some Hellenistic influences.

Simon is connected to the Hebrew name Simeon, though. They are called to be fishers of men. Gentiles could be compared to fish, dwelling in the Sea of the Gentiles.

In Jeremiah 16, verse 16, there is already the imagery of a fisher of men. Jesus calls his disciples much as Elijah calls Elisha in 1 Kings 19, verses 19-21. And also, while they are engaged in a symbolically important task, 1 Kings describes Elijah's calling of Elisha as follows.

So he departed from there and found Elisha the son of Shaphat, who was ploughing with twelve yoke of oxen in front of him, and he was with the twelve. Elijah passed by him and cast his cloak upon him. And he left the oxen and ran after Elijah and said, Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you.

And he said to him, Go back again, for what have I done to you? And he returned from following him and took the yoke of oxen and sacrificed them and boiled their flesh with the yokes of the oxen and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he arose and went after Elijah and assisted him. Jesus calls his disciples less as a rabbi would and more as a prophet would.

He calls them while they are engaged in their day-to-day tasks, but in tasks that are significant and meaningful. Elisha was called when he had twelve yoke of oxen, representing Israel. Peter, Andrew, James and John are called while they are fishing, in order that they might become fishers of men.

They must, like Elijah, make a complete break with their past life, but their initial vocation must also be transposed into something different, into a spiritual vocation to serve the kingdom of God. Is there symbolic importance in the difference between the tasks that the brothers are engaged in? Perhaps. Maybe Peter and Andrew's work of casting the net suggests that Peter will be the one who leads in mission, whereas in the case of James and John, who are mending the nets, it might suggest that they will lead in doctrine, and in oversight of the church, perhaps.

This, however, is not something I would put a great deal of weight upon. We should continue to hear the recurring word immediately in these accounts. Things are happening very quickly, and it isn't just Jesus himself who does things immediately, but the called disciples in response to his word.

It is possible that Mark's liking for the term immediately, especially in this chapter, plays off the quotation in verse 3 of the chapter. Some translations capture something of the connection between the word immediately and the make his path straight quotation by using straight way for immediately. John's gospels suggest that these men weren't unknown to Jesus, but were formerly disciples of John, and that they had already been



acquainted with him through John's witness.

This would make sense of their response when he calls them. Also, comparing the references to women at the cross, it seems that James and John were most likely Jesus' cousins. The disciples were a very tight-knit group, and it seems that many of them were known to each other or related to each other in some way before they were brought together as a band.

Finally, the reference to their leaving their father behind may also be more than just a bare reporting of what happened. Rather, it serves to underline something about the character of discipleship, and perhaps its greater urgency relative to that of Elijah and Elisha. A question to consider.

Of the three core disciples, Peter, James, and John, James is the one that we hear the least about. He is paired with John as one of the sons of thunder, and he is with Peter and John on key occasions, such as the raising of Jairus' daughter, the Mount of Transfiguration, and the Garden of Gethsemane. However, he is definitely the third of the group.

Apart from the account of his death, he is never really spoken of apart from in association with his more famous brother. What more can we learn about James as a character as we look through the New Testament?