

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Testing Our Generosity

2 Corinthians 8:1-15

Six months ago, when the coronavirus was spreading and things were beginning to shut down, there were dire predictions about the financial future of many churches and other ministries. Forecasts about declining contributions pointed to tough times ahead for lots of congregations. In some respects, portions of those predictions may have come true. But some research indicates that the forecasts were overblown. According to one survey, "Most evangelical churches and ministries saw giving remain steady or grow during the height of stay-at-home restrictions."¹ True, there was an initial drop in giving in many congregations, but then offerings started to pick back up. As for how much this positive trend will hold going forward, we'll have to continue to monitor things and see.

One person who keeps a close eye on these patterns is Brian Kluth. He heads up a church giving and research project that issues an annual report called State of the Plate. For many people, Kluth is the go-to guy to learn more about where people give, how much they give, and how they give.

Too bad that Paul didn't have a Brian Kluth to consult with as he promoted his ongoing collection for the impoverished church in Jerusalem. In today's text, Paul is addressing the state of the plate in the congregation at Corinth. He tries to stir the Corinthians' generosity by reminding them of what the Christians in Macedonia have done. Apparently (v. 4), Paul had not originally asked the Macedonians to participate in the offering, given their own dire economic circumstances. But when they heard of the collection, the Macedonians practically begged Paul to be allowed to participate. And now, despite being desperately poor and suffering tremendous persecution, the churches in Macedonia have contributed most generously. They've given beyond their means, and beyond Paul's expectations. So Paul lifts them up as an example of sacrifice and generosity.

This can be tricky business, trying to motivate one church to give by comparing it to another church. Last week, I attended a meeting of some leaders in our Potomac Baptist Association. Many of you know that the PBA is our denomination's network of congregations in Charles, Calvert, and St. Mary's counties. We partner in joint efforts to promote the kingdom of God and spread the gospel in Southern Maryland. That includes financial participation in the PBA's mission.

Before we left the meeting, our PBA administrative assistant distributed copies of the association's financial report, summarizing the numbers from the beginning of this year through early August. This was mainly to give us a sense of how our family of congregations has been doing during the coronavirus pandemic. A portion of the report listed how much each church gave to the PBA during a certain time period last year compared to the same period this year.

Now imagine that I had brought that report into the pulpit with me this morning and said, "Look at how this particular congregation in Waldorf, or this one in Nanjemoy, or this one in Dunkirk, or this one in Lusby, has given significantly more than Grace Baptist, even though many of them have fewer resources and greater financial challenges than we do. Keep that

in mind when you drop your offering in the box today.” That type of approach might lead you to close your checkbook rather than open it.

If I used that kind of appeal, I might have to track with Paul’s own careful communication in today’s text. After urging the Corinthians to follow the Macedonians’ example, he quickly clarifies that he’s not giving them a command. His aim isn’t to boss them around, but to give them his advice. It reminds me of the expression popularized by pastor Lon Solomon, “Not a Sermon, Just a Thought.” In this case, Paul is telling the Corinthians, “Not an order, just my opinion.” Keep in mind that Paul’s relationship with them has been strained, so he’s even more attentive to choosing the right terminology. He has to mend his relationship with the Corinthians while at the same time reinvigorating their participation in the offering he’s collecting. In other words, he has to simultaneously promote the peace and pass the plate.

“I am not commanding you,” says Paul, “but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others” (v. 8). At several points in this letter, Paul uses the word for “test,” both as a verb and as a noun. The word refers to the way that our true character is examined or proven when we face difficulties or challenges. In other words, who we really are is discerned through experiences of hardship. So after telling the Corinthians that they, like the Macedonians, should give out of their own free will, Paul tells them that they, like the Macedonians, now face a test of their own.

It’s not primarily a test of their skills in personal finance or their plans for the church’s stewardship campaign. It’s more of a test of what Paul calls “the sincerity of your love.” Paul tells the Corinthians that in light of the Macedonians’ enthusiasm for participating in the offering, how they themselves respond to his appeal will be a chance to prove that their love is genuine. This test is really an opportunity to show the depth of their devotion to the Lord and to the life of the Lord’s people, and their willingness to give of themselves in order provide for the needs of others.

Back in late April, Brian Stiller, global ambassador for the World Evangelical Alliance, wrote an article, warning pastors and their churches about the dangers of self-interest. He even described it as a kind of virus that threatens our spiritual health and the life of our communities, including Christian congregations. Under the kinds of circumstances we face during the pandemic, we need to be diligent about turning outward toward others, rather than being focused solely on ourselves.

Though Stiller’s message was directed especially to pastors, it challenges all of us who profess to follow Jesus. One portion of his article was headed, “It Is Test Time.” Stiller says:

..., let us be under no illusion: during this time of global fear and need, we will be tested. We will be seen for our deeds and judged for our generosity.... There is no hiding today. We may be sequestered, but as we emerge and show our faces in public, the gospel is on trial.

The tough question we might ask is, “How will we pass the test?” How are we leading in helping others do what identifies that which we believe?

Our deeds will be seen. Our identity will be noticed. Like a sticker, it will be pasted across the doors of our churches once we are able to meet together again. How we handle our own needs and those of others will define our witness of Jesus. The way we live now will imprint itself on the memories of our children and grandchildren with a clear picture of what it means to follow Jesus.

Yes, a vaccine will be found for COVID-19. Therapies will mitigate its power. Distancing will tamper its infectious spread. But what will be the test for the church of Jesus Christ, both during and following this virus?

The test is how our words of faith match our care for people.

Stiller goes on to cite an example from the early church, which responded to an epidemic in the mid-3rd century, when disease claimed up to a third of the population. One bishop wrote of the Christians,

Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected by others with disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbors and cheerfully accepting their pains.²

The selfless behavior of these Christians became a narrative of the gospel, a narrative that Paul summarizes in today's text, when he tells the Corinthians, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich" (v. 9). Paul isn't necessarily thinking of the trough, at birth, or that Jesus, the wandering preacher and teacher, had no place to lay his head, though these things are certainly true and important. What Paul has primarily in mind is the way that Jesus gave up the benefits of heavenly life in order to come to earth so that we could be saved. So Paul doesn't try to stir up the Corinthians' generosity by handing them a glossy brochure on church fundraising. Instead, he reminds them of the wonder of Jesus' amazing sacrifice in becoming human.

That core gospel story of Jesus' self-giving is what others need to see in our lives at all times, and especially times like the present. The great needs and enormous inequities that COVID-19 has created and exposed call for Christians to let the downward way of Christ take shape in our own lives. That includes recognizing the riches we already have in Christ—a new relationship with God, victory over sin and death, the presence of Christ, the presence of his people, fellowship with one another, a congregational family where we can learn the way of generosity. And then out of our riches in Christ, we are to give. As one commentator has put it, when it comes to a standard for giving, "The only standard is the love of Christ. In the light of that can we hold back anything?"³

In pandemic circumstances, where we may be more inclined to hold back, what God has done in Jesus Christ actually enables us to step up, further into even greater selflessness for the sake of others. The coronavirus has put many things to the test. It has tested our resolve, our patience, our perseverance, and our faith. It has tested our society, our households, and our relationships. It has tested our economy, our health care system, and our educational institutions. It has tested our churches. In particular, the pandemic can be the occasion for testing the genuineness of our generosity. Now is the time when others will examine, and when we should examine, just how willing we really are to give ourselves away to others, through financial and material resources, through time and talents, through effort and energy, through compassion and care. May you and I face this test and respond generously with the love of Christ.

¹ David Roach, "Christian Giving Rebounds to Pre-Pandemic Levels." Christianity Today website. June 11, 2020. Accessed August 12, 2020 <<https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2020/june/ecfa-coronavirus-church-ministry-giving-finances.html>>.

² Brian Stiller, "An Open Letter to Evangelicals on Self-Less Living During This Pandemic." The Exchange website. April 25, 2020. Accessed August 14, 2020 <<https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2020/april/open-letter-to-evangelicals-on-self-less-living-during-this.html>>.

³ Ernest Best, *Second Corinthians*. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1987) n.p.