

Sermon Notes

The Responsibility of the Church to the Poor (2 CORINTHIANS 8-9)

***Please note:** These notes are designed to aid in the preparation of a sermon. They outline a framework for the 2 Corinthians 8:1-9:5 passage. We encourage you to take time to prayerfully read this passage and the surrounding context, as well as other relevant commentaries and resources. Make the sermon your own, utilising these notes as you help your congregation explore the call and responsibility of the church to those trapped in poverty.*

Introduction

2 Corinthians was written by the Apostle Paul to the church at Corinth at a time when the Christians in Jerusalem were suffering because of famine. Paul does not mince words with the Christians in Corinth as he tells of their Christian brothers and sisters in Macedonia setting a wonderful example of generosity to those suffering in Jerusalem. He implores the Corinthians to join the Macedonians and not be tight fisted. Paul's exhortation is extremely relevant for Christians in our contemporary setting that is marked by global inequality.

Background Information

Paul, writing what was in fact his third letter to the church in Corinth (1 Cor 5:9), highlighted the suffering caused by a famine in the region. The famine resulted in the Jerusalem Christians needing assistance from outside. Paul was coordinating a collection from the churches throughout the region to support the church in Jerusalem.

The church in Macedonia is struggling in extreme poverty themselves (8:2). All the same they plead to be involved in the assistance for the Jerusalem Christians (v.4). They set an example of rich generosity, giving 'as much as they were able and even beyond their ability'. (8:3)

The church in Corinth were well known to Paul. The previous year they had been generous (8:10 and 9:2) and Paul had highlighted this generosity as an example to other churches, including the Macedonians. Paul encourages them to continue in their commitment to those suffering and to bring their expressions of generosity to fruition (8:11). This time Paul uses the Macedonians as an example to encourage the Corinthians to give generously.

Key Points from the Passage

Jesus set the example

Paul points to the amazingly gracious act of Christ's incarnation as the supreme example of self-sacrifice for the benefit of others (8:9). Certainly the Corinthian believers could follow the pattern of the Macedonian church; however the ultimate model was Jesus. His model of the servant heart in action clearly demonstrated what was required of his followers. They were to give all of themselves so others could become "rich" (8:9) thereby experiencing the abundant life he had promised.

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It is interesting to note that when the Jerusalem leaders gave support to Paul's mission to the Gentiles (see Galatians 2:10), the only thing they asked of Paul was that he "remember the poor". These early disciples had been with Jesus. They had seen his concern for those in need. They knew that concern for the poor was an essential component of the spread of the good news throughout the world.

Godly generosity can be contagious

Paul had used the generosity of the Corinthians as an example of discipleship for Christians in other cities. Without pleading or begging, the Macedonians were also generously giving out of the little they had. Now Paul returns to encourage the Corinthians to join again in this opportunity for service. Their initial generosity had much more of an impact than they expected.

The manner in which the Macedonians gave after seeing the example of the Corinthians now serves as a challenge to all followers of Christ. They "pleaded" to be included in the provision of assistance and gave far more than what was expected (8:3).

Assistance aimed to empower

The assistance Paul was wanting was not one from a disgruntled spirit that begrudgingly gave to those suffering. The giving was to be generous and to have a concern for others at its heart. The request from Paul was a test of the sincerity of their love (8:8). They were to give in the hope that the recipients would one day be in a position to reciprocate the generosity if needed (8:13-14).

Paul not only wanted equality amongst all people, he also wanted the Corinthians to see the empowering nature of their gift. In our contemporary world, which is rife with inequality, Christians need to ensure they are seeking to empower the poor by their giving, wanting them to fully experience dignity and liberty.

Corporate generosity

To give as individuals, based upon the life changing relationship we have with our Saviour is enormously worthwhile, however so is the corporate generosity that is encouraged by Paul in this letter to the Corinthians. In this context, Paul was asking one community of believers to give to another community of believers. Our work together to overcome poverty and suffering is an area where we can express our unity in the body of Christ. One of the reasons God has called us into His community is to display the unity of the body of Christ in the world. We are to share His Good News in word and action as a community of believers.

Global focus

This passage highlights the responsibility believers have to care for people beyond the boundaries of their own community. The collection by Paul presented an opportunity for the Macedonians and Corinthians to bless communities far removed from their familiar world. They would probably never visit the destination of their aid, they might never hear back from the recipients of their aid, nor would they be there to distribute their provision first hand. Just like these Christians, we are called to be involved in God's work in places we may never visit and places we may never work. God's children are spread throughout the world. The call to God's people *together* is to ensure that the needs of all those children are met.

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Reflection

- How do you think you may have felt if you were a member of the Corinthian church hearing Paul's message?
- What communities has God highlighted to you recently where there is an opportunity for you to meet a need? In what ways can you be of help to those people?
- Are there communities where God might be prompting you to sustain a longer term commitment?
- What corporate Christian social justice action can your church become a part of?

Suggested Actions

- Make a handprint on a 10.10.10 canvas. Pledge as individuals and as a church to fighting the injustice of poverty
- Visit your local Minister of Parliament to deliver your canvas and let them know that you are concerned for the poor and oppressed. Ask and encourage your MP to make a similar commitment to use her/his influence to advocate for the poor. See <http://www.micahchallenge.org.au/contact-your-politician> for a meeting guide
- Get informed about poverty and the part you can play in stopping it
- Sign the Micah Call
- Write handwritten letters to your local Member of Parliament stating the need for the Australian Government to stay faithful to their commitment to reach the Millennium Development Goals by 2015.
- Look for opportunities where your church can become involved in assisting the poor in your local area

For more multimedia, prayer, bible study, education and action resources visit:
www.micahchallenge.org.au