

Giving Heals

Have you ever noticed that *when you give, you are the one most enriched* by the act? God has designed life in this world in such a way that *all creation works in concert to give back to the giver*.

Acts 20:35b:

... he [the Lord Jesus] himself said, ‘*It is more blessed to give than to receive.*’”

2 Corinthians 8:9:

For you know *the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ*, that *though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor*, so that you by his poverty might become rich.

The Lord Jesus Christ may not have been financially rich, but he was clearly *rich at heart*. We should all aspire to this godly character trait.

2 Corinthians 8:10a:

And in this matter [the act of giving] I give my judgment: *this benefits you*,...

Giving benefits you, enriching your heart above all else. Like our Lord and Savior, we want to learn to be *rich at heart*. Living with that kind of grace concentrates our *thinking, not on what we are giving up but on how our giving lifts others up*. This is what the Apostle Paul called “the fruit that increases to your credit.”

Giving can help to change your mind for the better about a person or a situation. When we make up our minds to freely give to bless someone else, our hearts are drawn to them in the very act. This emotional dividend oftentimes far outweighs any physical benefit they may derive from our giving. Let me explain.

If you ever find yourself harboring ill will towards a brother or sister, one of the fastest ways to shed that resentment is to resolve to do something special for them. The more this “blessing” project ministers

to a particular need of theirs, the more meaningful it will be for them; and the more it demands your wholehearted, unreserved participation, the more transformative it will be for you personally. Once they have received your gift of loving attention, they will see how devotedly you threw yourself into the endeavor, and they will realize in their hearts that you were not inspired out of selfish motives. Your relationship will gain a solid new footing in the process.

To overcome hostility of any kind, remember that *giving heals*. Simple, unselfish acts of kindness between brethren always promote healing.

Charitable Works in the Early Church

To see a little more of how *giving heals*, let's take a look at some charitable contributions in the first-century Church. Which collection do you think is mentioned most often in the New Testament?

If you said *the collection for the poor Jewish Christians in Jerusalem*, you would be correct. You may be surprised to learn that the various stages of this collection for the saints actually spanned a fifteen-year period, from 44 A.D. all the way to 58 A.D.

Why was this particular charitable work so important for the Church? Although it did meet an urgent need at a given point in time, an even greater purpose of the collection was to promote healing of divisions between rival groups within the Church. Who opposed whom?

- Judaism was divided into two parties, Hebrews (or Aramaic-speaking Jews) and Hellenists (or Greek-speaking Jews).
 - Hebrews valued tradition over worldly culture.
 - Hellenists valued worldly culture over tradition.
- A further divide existed between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians.
 - Like the Hebrews, Jewish Christians valued tradition over worldly culture.
 - Like the Greeks or Hellenists, Gentile Christians valued worldly culture over tradition.

Critical to this discussion is understanding that in first-century Jerusalem and Judea, both the Jews and the Jewish Christians were at the bottom of the heap, demographically, socially and materially. Within the world at large, almost every other group was more numerous, wealthier, and more influential.

The poor saints in Jerusalem were Jewish Christians who, for the most part, had the least social and material status of all the Jewish groups, and tended to distrust those Jews who had been more deeply immersed in the Hellenist, worldly culture of the day.

With this context, let's return to our commentary on the collection for the poor Christians in Jerusalem.

A famine was developing in Judea in 44 A.D. One of the factors making famine a greater threat in Judea than in other countries was the land's virtually complete dependence on periodic rainfall. Unlike the Egyptians or the Babylonians, the Judeans had no great rivers to draw upon to water their crops in time of drought. Also, because most Judean people were not wealthy, they often lacked the financial wherewithal to bring in food from afar in such situations.

God initiated an act of grace to take care of the imminent scarcity by sending a group of prophets from the area of need (Jerusalem) to an area that could help to supply the need (Antioch).

Acts 11:25-30:

So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul [both of them Jews],

and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the [primarily Gentile] disciples were first called Christians.

Now in these days prophets [plural] came down from Jerusalem [the center of outreach to Jewish Christians] to Antioch [the center of outreach to Gentile Christians].

And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world (this took place in the days of Claudius).

So the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers [Jewish Christians] living in Judea.

And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul [both of them Jewish Christians].

These events took place under the Roman emperor Claudius in the years 44 and 45 A.D. The “great famine over all the world” was actually localized at certain spots around the Empire, specifically in Rome, Greece and Judea. Of these three locations, the one where believers would be most directly impacted at that time was Judea. The prophecy of Agabus enabled the Church to be a step ahead of the need. Barnabas and Saul could begin their monetary collection before the famine became severe, so that the relief literally arrived right on time.

Just think of the joyous thanksgiving this would have produced among those Jewish Christians. Far from exacerbating the historic rivalry between the Aramaic-speakers and the Hellenists, this generous support would have gone a long way to healing any divisive feelings.

This was the first collection for the Jewish Christians, but it would not be the last.

“Remember the Poor”

Some five or six years later when Paul and Barnabas attended the Jerusalem Council with Titus (a Gentile Christian) in 50 A.D., there was still much suspicion and mistrust between the wealthier Christians of the dispersion (in places like Antioch) and the poorer Christians of Judea. This ongoing rancor was made worse by Judaizing agitators who would travel to Syria and stir up discontent by the legalistic demands they placed on their formerly Gentile brethren. Paul and Barnabas

recognized that this festering division was a serious problem that needed to be addressed.

From a reconciliation perspective, one of the great realizations to come out of the Jerusalem Council was the public acknowledgement that God was the Source, not only of the ministry to the circumcised (Jews), but also of the ministry to the uncircumcised (Gentiles).

Galatians 2:7-9:

On the contrary, when they saw that I [Paul] had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised [Gentiles], just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised [Jews]

(for he who worked through Peter for his apostolic ministry to the circumcised [Jews] worked also through me for mine to the Gentiles),

and when James and Cephas [which is Peter] 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 [Jews].

Giving the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and Saul was a clear display of unity. With this agreement, the leaders concurred on a clear division of labor: Peter's ministry would be directed to the circumcised (the Jews), and Paul's would be directed to the uncircumcised (the Gentiles). But the leaders in Jerusalem sought one additional commitment from the visitors.

Galatians 2:10:

Only, they asked us [Paul and Barnabas, and by extension the Gentile churches] to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.

Just what does "remember the poor" mean? That wherever Paul and Barnabas went, they should concentrate on helping the destitute? And why was this a priority?

Actually, “remember the poor” was not just some vague philanthropic notion, but had instead a very specific object in mind: that the largely Gentile churches in the newly-opened regions would be ready and willing to assist the poverty-stricken Jewish believers in Judea in their time of need. The leadership in Jerusalem were making a pointed request of the Gentile churches: that the better-off believers in Antioch and beyond (who were Gentile Christians) would not forget to share of their material abundance when hardship made life difficult back in the birthplace of the Church (Jerusalem, where believers were primarily of Jewish background).

Paul and Barnabas had already put the first stake in the ground with their earlier relief mission to Jerusalem following Agabus’s prophecy of approaching want. Now, following the Jerusalem Council, James, Peter and John wanted to exhort Paul and Barnabas to not forget the churches of Judea (the Jewish Christians) as they sent them out to deliver the apostolic decree to the Gentile churches.

The Jerusalem Council decree was a message of peace to the Gentile believers whose joy and confidence had been damaged by the accusations of the Judaizers. The leaders of the Church knew that a commitment to financial giving on the part of the new churches would promote healing in two ways:

- The hearts of the Jewish Christians in Judea would be more inclined towards their Gentile brethren because of their good will and generosity; and
- The hearts of the Gentile believers would be healed as they let go of any old resentments due to impositions of legalism and factionalism

The happy outcome would be healing in the Church, with newfound bonds of affection between the two formerly competing groups.

The Collection for the Saints in Jerusalem

The largest and most comprehensive collection for the saints in Jerusalem occurred during the period of Paul's third missionary journey in 54-58 A.D. This effort was a direct result of the commitment made at the Jerusalem Council to "remember the poor."

By this time further schisms between Jew and Gentile had opened up. A pattern had emerged where practically everywhere Paul went to open a new church, unbelieving Jews fomented persecution against the newly-born-again ones, many of whom were Gentiles.

1 Thessalonians 2:14-16:

For you, brothers, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea [who were Jewish Christians]. For you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews,

who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out, and displease God and oppose all mankind

by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved—so as always to fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them at last!

It was becoming harder and harder for Gentile and Jewish Christians to like each other. Paul himself was keenly aware of these antagonisms, having been stoned by the Jews before being raised from the dead at Lystra. Nevertheless, his heart for the Church was that all believers of whatever background live in harmony with one another, and to this end he worked diligently.

Departing from Antioch in 54 A.D., Paul ministered in areas of Asia Minor that he'd previously evangelized such as Galatia and Phrygia, and finally came to Ephesus where he had only briefly spent time before. His traveling companions would have had an outsized role to play on this journey, since apparently at every stop along the way the believers selected local leaders to solicit, receive and guard collections

that Paul was intending to deliver to Jerusalem, his ultimate destination. Paul would not personally take part in managing the monies, but would instead charge others to administer the activity, trustworthy leaders selected by the believers in their respective areas.

The method that these designees used to take in the promised funds is described in

1 Corinthians 16:1-3:

Now concerning [the collection for the saints](#): as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do.

On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come.

And when I arrive, [I will send those whom you accredit by letter to carry your gift to Jerusalem](#).

So you see, the “collection for the saints” was indeed headed for Jerusalem.

1 Corinthians 16:4:

If it seems advisable that I should go also, they will accompany me.

Paul openly acknowledged, however, the fact that he was the one organizing the whole endeavor. He was simply not executing the details as these other men were.

Romans 15:25, 26:

At present, however, I am going [where?] to Jerusalem bringing [aid to the saints](#) [so this is the same collection].

For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some [contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem](#).

And to see a little more about this matter, I'd like to read to you 2 Corinthians 8:1-6 from the New English Bible.

2 Corinthians 8:1-6 [NEB]:

We must tell you, friends, about the grace of generosity which God has imparted to our congregations in Macedonia.

The troubles they have been through have tried them hard, yet in all this they have been so exuberantly happy that from the depths of their poverty they have shown themselves lavishly open-handed.

Going to the limit of their resources, as I can testify, and even beyond that limit,

they begged us most insistently, and on their own initiative, to be allowed to share in this generous service to their fellow-Christians [who were Jewish Christians; whereas they were Gentile Christians].

And their giving surpassed our expectations; for they gave their very selves, offering them in the first instance to the Lord, but also, under God, to us.

The upshot is that we have asked Titus, who began it all, to visit you and bring this work of generosity also to completion.

Clearly, Paul's heart's desire in organizing this five-year-long collection was to promote grace, not works; and healing, not division. Much had previously transpired in the early Church to pit brother against brother, believer against fellow. But there was *healing in giving*.

This is why Paul could extol in

2 Corinthians 9:12-15:

For the ministry of this service is not only *supplying the needs* of the saints but is also *overflowing in many thanksgivings* to God.

By their approval of this service, *they will glorify God because of your submission* that comes from your confession of the gospel of Christ, and the generosity of your contribution for them and for all others,

while *they long for you and pray for you*, because of the surpassing grace of God upon you.

Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!

There's healing in giving.