

*2 Corinthians 8:9-16; 9:7-9*  
*November 14, 2021*  
*"Beyond Giving to Discipleship"*  
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Well, last Sunday, it was a little embarrassing. But, today, it's gone beyond embarrassing.

What I'm talking about is how, in choosing a text, and a theme from the text, and then a title for this Sunday's sermon, I once again this week forgot to make the -- original -- title conform to the overall theme of the sermon series I've been preaching for several Sundays now, *viz.*, the theme of "Beyond". So, once again this week, I need you to look at the Notes sheet inserted into your bulletins, and note -- first of all -- that the new title for this morning's sermon is "**Beyond Giving to Discipleship**".

With that in mind, let's look at the readings from 2 Cor. 8-9 which take us back to the earliest days of the Christian Church, somewhere in the 50s AD, and the contents of a letter written by Paul to a congregation in southern Greece, in the city of Corinth, of which he was the founding pastor. You'll recall that Paul, a highly educated Jew from modern day southern Turkey, became -- following his dramatic conversion experience of the Resurrected Jesus -- the leading missionary of the early Church, traveling over the ancient Mediterranean world and planting Christian congregations, the church at Corinth being, not only one of those congregations but among the most troubled -- and troubling -- of those congregations.

Nonetheless, Paul is bold enough to ask them, along with other of these congregations, to contribute to what he called "the Collection". It was what we might call a "Special Foreign Mission Offering". In this case, Paul is appealing to the church at Corinth to give money for the relief of fellow Christians in Jerusalem, that region being in the grip of a famine over several years. While this sounds like a normal thing to us -- hearing about the suffering of people far away, and then sending money, e.g., through UMCOR, to aid them in various ways, whether or not they are fellow Christians -- this kind of appeal in Paul's era was *unprecedented* -- **the first of its kind**.

He was asking Christians in Corinth -- a place a thousand or so miles, and weeks and weeks away from Jerusalem (depending on how you traveled), and a congregation almost all, if not all of whom, were Gentiles (non-Jews) -- to contribute to the support of other Christians, almost all, if not all of whom were Jewish by background. He is asking them, i.e., to give financially to the support people they have never met, and never will meet, in a place they have likely never been or ever will go.

It was an **extraordinary** ask -- and *very* different from a church asking its members to give toward the building of a shiny new church facility, which they could, and use to their enjoyment. Re: the story from my first appointment in 1984 of the shiny new Family Ministries Building at Mauldin UMC, and its being used solely for the benefit of those who built and paid for it, and how the truly "Christian" thing to do would have been to build and pay for it, but disallow Mauldin UMC members from using it. The point is that Jesus' kind of giving is done with no hope of benefit to Jesus. All the benefit accrues to you and me.

And, in making the appeal, Paul doesn't even dwell on the suffering of those the Corinthians' gifts will help. Instead, he focuses on God, and what God has done in the world -- and, quite dramatically -- in Paul's own life, through Jesus:

For you know the generous act [*charis*] of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.

Paul is, of course, referring to what Jesus -- first through his Incarnation alone, and then through the whole of his life on earth, in human history -- has offered the world. In leaving the glory of heavenly life and coming down to us in human form, Jesus gave sacrificially, i.e., altogether apart from his willingness to suffer an unjust death on a Roman cross. Real sacrifice, for the sake of the good of others, is at the heart of the Christian story from the very beginning.

And following Jesus, being his disciples -- his students -- together as the Church, *viz.*, loving like Jesus, in the same self-giving, self-humbling way, and actually risky way -- is the only way the Church grows, when -- as students of Jesus -- we learn how to love one another, whom we know, and then, when we become really good at that, go out and love others whom we don't know, and love them in ways that are obviously costly to us, and with no strings attached. When the life and work of the Church is centered around the living presence of Christ, i.e., and we then go out and make Christ present to others, the Church grows.

When we are living this way, we have moved far beyond meeting church budgets, or even responding to "generosity initiatives", even in support of a church building project which promises to be the first step in helping re-launch St. Matthew in its community. When we live -- and share, and give -- this way, we are proving ourselves to be true disciples of Jesus, who has taught, and is still, by his Holy Spirit, teaching human beings grace -- the gracious, generous life -- which is really to say, still **"saving" us by grace**.

And then, from 2 Cor. 9, Paul offers the assurance that "God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work (v. 8). God, Paul is saying, takes care of those who give themselves to taking care of others, who -- in following Jesus, and being his Church together with others -- grow more and more

into Christ-likeness, become a part of his living, never-again-to-die, Body in the life of planet earth. Just as Christ was raised from the dead, and taken up again into heaven, so our security, both here and now, and eternally, is guaranteed.

So, "BEYOND" really is an opportunity for us, not just to give, financially, like those Corinthian Christians, in an unprecedented way, *viz.*, at levels beyond that which we have ever given before. At its heart, "BEYOND" is the invitation to draw closer to Jesus as his disciples, and to invite the Lord Jesus Christ to be more and more at the center of St. Matthew's life and work.

I pray you and I, we, will accept this wonderful invitation wholeheartedly.