

converts at Corinth from losing face because of his unsubstantiated boast (9:3) if there is a meager collection of money from Corinth.

### Sowing and Reaping: Picture of a Generous Giver 9:6-10

The remainder of the chapter (2 Cor. 9:6-15) develops the idea of a *gift of blessing*, a *eulogia*, a gift that reflects the *indescribable gift* of God (9:15). In the first part, 9:6-10, Paul makes his point by the use of a common agrarian metaphor in the form of a proverb: *The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully (eulogiais) will also reap bountifully (eulogiais; 9:6).*

Ancient farmers took a risk in sowing grain. They believed that the more seed sown, the greater the harvest of grain. But if the rains failed to come, the farmers lost the grain they sowed. Those who risked little would at least have some grain left if the harvest failed (Betz, 1985:98-100). Paul's use of the metaphor to develop his new word for the gift (*eulogia*), places responsibility for the bountiful harvest in the benevolent God (9:7-8), whom the Corinthians know to be abundantly gracious.

God, abounding in grace as he does to the Corinthians, *loves a cheerful giver* (9:7b). *Cheerful* translates *hilaron*, from which comes the English "hilarious." Paul's version of the proverb differs from its source in Proverbs 22:8a (LXX) by one word. In Proverbs, God "blesses" (*eulogei*); in 2 Corinthians 9:7, God *loves* (*agapa*). Strangely, the key word (*eulogia* in verb form) that Paul seeks to develop for the collection in this appeal of chapter 9 sits ready to quote in the proverb he uses, yet he replaces the word "blesses," with *loves*. Paul's version of Proverbs may have the word *loves* instead of "blesses" (Hughes: 331), though that is unlikely, given the available evidence. Nor is it any more plausible to say that Paul has a lapse of memory, thinking the proverb contains the word *loves* instead of "blesses" (Plummer: 259).

Paul knows that of all the texts in his Greek Bible containing the word *cheerful*, this one in Proverbs 22:8a also had his key word, *eulogei*, "blesses." By converting the traditional "blessing" (*eulogia*) of God out of its Hebraic setting into the Christian understanding of the love of God in Jesus Christ, Paul effectively applies the proverb to the situation of the collection. God *loves* humankind unconditionally in Christ and responds in love to those who, like him, give cheerfully rather than *reluctantly or under compulsion* (9:7). Giving is above all

a matter of attitude: On what basis does a Christian *decide* to give (9:7a)?

Taking Paul's lead metaphor about sowing and reaping (9:6) at face value, one may infer a selfish motive in giving: the more one gives, the more one gets back for oneself. But Paul expounds his metaphor in quite another direction. God will grant a bountiful blessing to cheerful givers *so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work* (9:8). Thus, any hint of a self-centered motive is excluded. As proof that the sharing motive is right for God's people, Paul in 9:9 cites verbatim a line from the Greek version of a wisdom Psalm (111:9, LXX; cf. 112:9, NRSV). In the Psalm, the actor is one who fears the Lord (111:1); in Paul's application, the actor is God: *He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.*

Lest there be any lingering doubt about the meaning of the agricultural metaphor of sowing and reaping, Paul explains further in 2 Corinthians 9:10 (cf. Isa. 55:10). Since it is in God's nature to supply seed for sowing and bread for food, he will multiply the metaphorical seed of the gift of money for the saints. God will increase the metaphorical harvest of *justice (righteousness or benevolence)* by distributing the surplus of the grace of God. The *righteousness* in this text bears some resemblance to the Jewish practice of almsgiving (Lietzmann: 138).

### Many Thanksgivings to a Super-Generous God 9:11-15

In assessing the overall effect of a generous collection from Corinth, Paul identifies four interrelated facets. Then he closes the entire argument with an exuberant paean of praise to God (9:15). First, note the four facets of the effect.

1. A generous gift out of Corinthian wealth will provide for *the needs of the saints* (9:11a, 12a). Paul is a practical Christian thinker. Whatever else the collection may symbolize, its earthly use matters to him. Saints of God should not be poor when other saints are rich. As these two chapters (2 Cor. 8-9) demonstrate, this is a theological imperative for Paul. "As its history unfolded, the collection became for Paul a model of his theology. . . . Pauline theology . . . is directed towards living history" (Georgi, 1965:78-79).

2. A generous gift from Corinth to Jerusalem will result in *many thanksgivings to God* (9:11b, 12b). As Paul relates the collection to thanksgivings, plural, he envisions a worship ceremony at Jerusalem

in celebration of the grace of God. Many people, upon receiving the gift, will offer praises to God like those "related to ancient votive offerings" (Betz, 1985:118). For their part, the Corinthians should rejoice that God mediates his grace through them. In this thanksgiving section, Paul adds yet another new word to the ministry of the collection, *leitourgias* (from which comes *liturgy*), translated *the rendering* in NRSV (9:12).

The word *leitourgia* was current in the sociopolitical setting of the Roman world in which Paul and the Corinthians lived. It indicates a *public service* rendered by citizens under law at their own expense (Betz, 1985:117). Paul borrows the word, transforming its secular function and using it to describe a public service of worship in which both *the saints* of Jerusalem and the Corinthian believers participate jointly and freely. The Corinthians do this by their generous gift of blessing, and *the saints* of Jerusalem by their *many thanksgivings* (Moule, 1961:80).

3. The generous gift will act as proof of the Corinthians' *obedience to the confession* they make (9:13). The first part of verse 13 is difficult to understand. The NRSV translation reads: *Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel*. Literally, the ministry of the collection glorifies God *by the obedience of your confession*. *Of your confession* is genitive and could be the subject or object of obedience. If object (as in the NRSV), then the Corinthians are obedient to whatever is represented in the term *confession* (used only here in Paul's letters). If subject, then the obedience is an expression of the *confession*. The latter seems more likely in this context.

Normally where the word *confession* appears in the NT, it refers to a statement affirming faith in Jesus Christ. But here at 9:13, *confession* denotes the particular expression of faith in Christ represented by the *gift of blessing* (9:5-6, notes). The *obedience or submission* consists in the act of giving generously, an act that signifies the grace of God in *the gospel of Christ*.

The *confession* is scarcely a legal contract by which Paul's Corinthian converts submit to Jerusalem (so Betz, 1985:123). Paul's consistent sentiment is that neither he nor his Gentile converts need to submit to Jerusalem (cf. Gal. 1-2). Sufficient for Paul is the **mutual benefit** of the two communities to each other, by which their union is validated. Moreover, the Corinthians' *obedience of their confession* relates particularly to their promise a year earlier to take up a collection for *the saints*. Now, a year later, the *gift of blessing* expresses

obedience to their earlier confession, which in effect is a confession of the gospel of Christ.

4. The generous gift creates a *communal spirit of mutual benefit* (2 Cor. 9:13b-14). Paul encourages unity within and between the churches. Of principal concern to him, expressed most pointedly in Romans 9-11, is the unity of his Gentile mission churches with their Jewish counterparts. Bringing the collection to Jerusalem will signal the *participation* (*sharing, koinōnias*, 2 Cor. 9:13b) of the Gentile communities with the believing remnant in Jerusalem. The Jerusalem group in turn will intercede on behalf of the Corinthians in view of the *superabundant* (*surpassing*, 9:14) *grace* (or *gift*) of God to them, and through them to *the saints* (9:12).

Paul is gripped by the enormous possibility enshrined in his language of 9:13-14, the union of Jewish and Gentile humanity never before attained. He exclaims his depth of gratitude to God: *Thanks (charis) be to God for his indescribable gift!* On this triumphant note of praise, Paul concludes his appeal for the *gift of blessing* from the Corinthians for *the saints*.

This exclamation of thanksgiving also concludes the Letter of Reconciliation of 2 Corinthians (1-9). Originally the letter would have ended with the usual greetings and benediction. The ending was either accidentally torn off the scroll and lost, or was deliberately deleted by the compiler in joining the Letter of Defense (2 Cor. 10-13) to the Letter of Reconciliation (2 Cor. 1-9).

#### THE TEXT IN BIBLICAL CONTEXT

The biblical context of the collection appears in the TBC after the notes on 2 Corinthians 8. Arising from the second appeal of chapter 9 are three additional elements: (1) the gift of blessing, the *eulogia* (9:5-6), (2) the agricultural metaphor of sowing and reaping (9:6-10), and (3) the concluding exclamation of thanksgiving (9:15). All three come from within the horizon of the larger biblical world.

First, the *gift of blessing* (*eulogia*). The word usually connotes a blessing in the sense of a benevolent speech-act. Paul uses the word in this sense at several points. For example, in 1 Corinthians 10:16 he refers to the cup of the Lord's Supper as "the cup of the blessing (*eulogia*)," which involves the act of drinking the memorial wine accompanied with the eucharistic word (11:25). The blessing in this sense declares the church's right relationship to God in the speech-act of participation in the Lord's Supper. Similarly, in Galatians 3:14

the blessing from Abraham is mediated to the Gentiles through the speech-act of Christ proclaimed by Paul. In this instance the Gentiles receive “the blessing” of a right relationship with God (cf. also Rom. 15:29; Eph. 1:3; Heb. 6:7; James 3:10).

As used in 2 Corinthians 9:5 for the collection of money from one community for another, the word echoes its antecedents in the Greek translation of the OT. For example, in Joshua 15:19 Caleb’s new wife asked him for a gift (*eulogia*) to consolidate their relationship. Other references reveal a similar implication in the word: the act of giving something to another bestows a blessing and confirms a relationship (e.g., Gen. 33:11; 2 Kings 5:15).

Second, the agricultural metaphor of sowing and reaping in 2 Corinthians 9:6-10 was already present in Greco-Roman and Jewish writings of the time. The ancients were adept at integrating agricultural metaphors into their view of life and world expressed in literature. Hesiod’s *Works and Days* is the earliest evidence from the Greek side. A similar use of agricultural imagery in Jewish hands spans the entire literature of the OT (Betz, 1985:85 and notes). Thus Paul drew on a common fund of proverbial agricultural imagery to create his own proverb for the opening point about the *gift of blessing*.

For example, Proverbs 11:26 (LXX) reads: “The Gentiles pronounce a curse on those who withhold grain but a blessing (*eulogia*) on the head of the one who distributes it.” Or again in Proverbs 22:8. “The one who sows corruption will reap disaster” (cf. Job 4:8; 31:8; Ps. 126:5; Eccl. 11:4; Jer. 12:13; Hos. 8:7; Mic. 6:15). The notion of divine recompense being meted out on human endeavor, negative or positive, occupied the writings of sages, priests, and prophets in Israelite and Jewish tradition (e.g., Sirach 7:3; Test. of Levi 13:6; Philo, *Unchangeableness of God* 166). It conveniently found its way into the NT, as in Paul’s formulation here at 9:6 (of 2 Cor.; cf. Matt. 6:26; Luke 19:21; John 4:36-37; Georgi, 1965:67-68; Käsemann, 1969:73).

Third, the concluding thanksgiving bears some resemblance to the hymn-like praise of the self-emptying Christ of 2 Corinthians 8:9. Yet the final exclamation of 9:15 exults in the *gift* of God and is thereby directly tied to the many thanksgivings accruing from the gift of the collection. Paul can only exult in the gift; he cannot describe it. Paul’s word for *gift* (*dōrea*) in verse 15 occurs only here in 2 Corinthians 9, but is commonly used in the NT for God’s gift of the Spirit of Christ to the Gentiles. Marvelous and mysterious, the gift is *in-*

*describable*, the gift of the Son of God to human hearts, bestowing love unconditionally on humankind, as John 3:16 attests. Such a gift defies description, even as God does. Of this indescribable gift of love, Paul declares elsewhere: “I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20).

It is possible that in 2 Corinthians 9:15 “Paul actually cited the first line of an early Christian prayer of thanksgiving” (Betz, 1985:127). If so, that citation places Paul’s concluding thanksgiving and the letter as a whole in the context of early Christian worship. Quoting the first line of a well-known prayer urges the congregation to finish the prayer from memory, thus affirming Paul’s argument and appeal in the letter.

### THE TEXT IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

Several points arise from the discussion of the collection in 2 Corinthians 8-9 (in addition to TLC after notes on 2 Cor. 8, above). One concerns the **unity of the faith** symbolized in “the gift of blessing” from the Gentile Christians in Corinth to the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. The religious and cultural differences between the two groups were great, but the differences shrank in the presence of the grace of Christ symbolized in the “offering of the Gentiles.” Similarly, the church worldwide is diverse, but united in the Spirit of Christ and the bond of peace.

Paul, in 2 Corinthians exercises **careful accountability** in the handling of the financial “gift of blessing.” He gladly endorses the representatives who will ensure the safe deposit of the collection in the treasury at Jerusalem. Churches today can take a lesson from Paul.

Finally, Paul underscores the **bedrock theological motive** for the *gift of blessing* to Jerusalem: the *indescribable gift* of God (2 Cor. 9:15). This word *indescribable* captured the attention of later patristic writers and apologists. It has remained important to Christian thinkers ever since, as seen in creeds and catechisms of the church. God is confessed as inscrutable and indescribable, his gifts and acts of grace beyond compare. What are the implications of such an understanding of the gift-giving God?

The church through the ages “imagines” God, and does so sincerely, else there could be no personal faith. Problems arise, as history shows, when the mental “image” of faith in the indescribable God becomes fixed. Sometimes the image is fixed in wood and stone, but

no less so in dogma and system. Of all the snares awaiting the church in any age, the one most subtle is the snare of fixing an image of God. When God is fixed, structured, and God's gift of grace systematized, the worshiper becomes idolatrous.

An exclusively feminist God is an image-become-idol just as surely as an exclusively patriarchal God is also an image-become-idol. An exclusively fundamentalist God is an image-become-idol just as surely as an ultraliberal God. An exclusively denominationalist God is an image-become-idol just as surely as a nondenominational God. So it is with all such particularistic images of God. Folly enters the church when the unfolding mystery of God and his plan of salvation are theologically sculpted into granite figures for human adoration.

*Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift* of compassionate redemption in Jesus Christ, that enters human minds and cultures in exhilarating new ways in every generation. This is the fundamental motive for believers in giving their material means to provide equity and security.

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