



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Aid to the Saints Romans 15:25-33

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“This morning I want to talk about money.” There, I said it. I think for the vast majority of honest clergymen, those are some of the hardest and most awkward words to say. I’ve met few preachers of integrity who find preaching about money to be an easy thing. Money’s a sensitive subject in our culture. I’ve found it interesting to hear about our churches in Cuba, where there doesn’t seem to be much awkwardness in addressing money and where the churches actually post lists of parishioners and whether or not they’ve contributed that month. I suspect that it’s not a big problem for them because there’s so little financial disparity. They’re all equal in their poverty under a Communist regime. In our culture it’s taboo to discuss our income. The rich have been taught since they were children not to rub their wealth in others’ faces and the poor are often embarrassed by their situation. Many in our culture are in debt up to their eyeballs to present an image of wealth that isn’t real. But, of course, for the preacher to address money is often to confront an idol that many Christians struggle to let go of. I think that’s the biggest reason talking about money is so awkward. It doesn’t help that when a preacher talks about money, he also talking about the source of his own income. It’s one thing to go to your boss to say you want a raise. It’s another thing to go to your congregation, even if you aren’t in need of a raise, and preach that *God says* to give. No, it’s usually only the *dishonest* preachers who can talk easily about that sort of thing—the ones who fleece the sheep to buy big houses, fancy cars, and feel no shame at all claiming that God has told them to buy another private jet.

And, of course, the *dishonest* preachers out there compound the awkwardness that honest preachers face when they preach about money.

It’s not a new problem. Money has always been an idol to which people devote themselves. There have always been wolves masquerading as shepherds in order to fleece the sheep. It’s not hard to see St. Paul struggling to address money as we read his epistles. Some of the most difficult Greek in the New Testament can be found in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9, where Paul asks them for money to assist their poor brothers and sisters in Jerusalem.

We also see just how awkward and difficult the subject of money can be in Paul’s personal choice to support his own ministry. Paul was a tent-maker. Because of that, we use the term today to describe a pastor or missionary or someone who supports himself in ministry through some kind of secular work. Paul’s secular work of making tents is what supported him in his ministry. He didn’t take a salary of offering from the churches to pay his bills. He paid them himself. That’s not an easy thing to do. I speak from experience. It’s tiring. It takes you away from your family. It’s almost impossible to have any kind of life outside of work. But certain people are called to that sort of ministry and even thrive in it. When I think of Paul as a tent-maker I can think of one or two colleagues who, like Paul, don’t have families to support. They also seem to have boundless energy. They never seem to get tired. (I’m often very envious of that!) I suspect that Paul was one of those sorts of people.

When Paul does ask for money from the churches, he often appeals to the fact that he never asks for money for himself. And yet he’s also gracious to the rest of us that do rely on the gospel as our livelihood. He stresses that this is a personal choice he’s made for himself and that, under ordinary circumstances, the Church needs to

financially support those who devote themselves to preaching and teaching the good news about Jesus. Twice, in 1 Corinthians 9:7-14 and again in 1 Timothy 5:17, Paul stresses that “those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel”. He says that this is a command of the Lord and he points back to the *torah* and the commandment: “Thou shalt not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain”.

But, again, Paul had made a *personal* choice to support himself. He’d been writing to the churches—the ones that he had planted or where he had done significant work—and had asked them for money. It wasn’t for himself. It was for their Jewish brothers and sisters in Jerusalem church. This is what he writes about in Romans 15:25-29.

At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints. For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. For they were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings. When therefore I have completed this and have delivered to them what has been collected, I will leave for Spain by way of you. I know that when I come to you I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ.

Remember that last week we read as Paul told the Roman Christian that his plan was to go as a missionary to Spain and that he was hoping to use Rome a sort of home base. That was ultimately his reason for writing this letter. It was to prepare them for his visit and to prepare them to be the sort of supporters he would need behind him. But he’s not quite ready to come to Rome. First, he’s got to go the opposite direction, back to Jerusalem. Here’s why.

The Jerusalem church was struggling. When Paul mentions the “poor among the saints at Jerusalem”, he didn’t mean that he was taking up a collection just for the poor people in that church. The whole church had fallen on hard times. This gave Paul an idea that tied in with the apostolic calling to take the good news to the Gentiles. It also ties in with the unity of the church—Jewish and Gentile believers being one body in Christ—that he’s been stressing so much in this letter. He decided to take up a collection from the Gentile churches and deliver it himself to the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem.

First, the situation in Jerusalem. We read at the end of Acts 2 that the believers in Jerusalem, in their early zeal and, maybe, born out of an expectation that Jesus would come in judgement any day, pooled their possessions. Luke says that they “had all things in common” and that they “were selling their possessions and belonging and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need” (2:48, 49). They pooled their property, their farms and fields, their businesses for the common good of all. Their intentions and motives were good. But their resources eventually dried up. The Christians in Jerusalem faced growing persecution from unbelieving Jews who rejected Jesus and resented their fellow Jews who followed him. The Christians in Jerusalem were increasingly isolated. On top of that a famine struck Judea. The believers there were in dire straits.

Paul seems to have had this in mind when he wrote to Gentile believers *not* to sell their property and share in everything the way the Jerusalem church had. He did write to the Gentile churches that they should look after each other’s needs, but not by becoming early Christian communists. Paul assumes that the rich will use their property and businesses and their profits to help the church and to help their brothers and sisters in need, not

sell everything off in an attempt to level everything out. They’d done that in Jerusalem and now they had no resources left for their own support. That said, while the Jerusalem church may have made a mistake—one that other groups had made before and continue to make today—their theology was good. The point was that no one in the Church should be in need. As God has given himself in Jesus, so the people of Jesus would give of themselves to provide for the needs of each other. That’s the goal and what the Jewish Christians did was praiseworthy and honoured God regardless of the bad economics behind it. There is a need for Christians to be well grounded in sound economics so that we can be good stewards of the resources God has given us, but more important is the desire to give of ourselves to each other and to be sacrificially generous as God has been sacrificially generous to us. Our generosity witnesses to the world the cross, where Jesus sacrificed himself for us. Our willingness to hold loosely to our money and property also witness our faith in God and our allegiance to him. The world trusts in Mammon. For the Christian, money and property are tools to be used in service of the God who has given his all to redeem us.

Just as preaching about money can be awkward, Paul’s desire for the Gentile churches to give this gift of money to the Jerusalem church was awkward. And yet that’s precisely why he took up this collection. This gift of money for the Jewish believers was the gospel in action. It was a tangible display of the unity of Jewish and Gentile believers in Jesus. Paul saw himself as the fulfiller of prophecy—of the Jew who would bring the Gentiles to the temple and he writes about taking this gift to Jerusalem using that language and imagery. He’s like the priest presenting this offering—an offering from the Gentiles—to the God of Israel.

So the first thing this offering does is show the Gentile’s solidarity with their Jewish brothers and sisters. At least some of the Jewish Christians resented the Gentile Christians. The leaders in Jerusalem had set up this system of sharing everything in common. It worked well at first, but then they ran out of resources to share. Meanwhile, the rich amongst the Gentile believers kept their farms and businesses and were helping the poor with their profits. The Gentiles had a better long-term system. This was a chance for the Gentiles to extend their charity to the Jewish church and to show their solidarity with them—Gentiles sacrificing of themselves to provide for their brothers and sisters who had sacrificed and lost everything. Both were modelling and witnessing the self-giving nature of God manifested at the cross.

Second, this offering confronted the Jewish believers in their rejection of Paul. As we read the book of Acts and as we read in Paul’s personal statements, particularly in Galatians, we see that Paul’s ideas and Paul’s mission were not well-received. There were disputes between Paul and the other apostles and it all had to do with the place of Gentiles in the church. In Galatians Paul writes about “certain men from James”—not necessarily that it was James himself who was opposing him, but at least some followers or disciples of James. Paul calls them the “circumcision party”. They obviously had some pretty significant influence. He writes, also in Galatians, that at one point Peter ate with Gentiles and it wasn’t a problem, but these men from James or men of the circumcision party had convinced Peter not to eat with Gentile believers. Paul and Peter had, more or less, resolved their differences, but many of the Jewish believers still opposed Paul. In taking the good news about Jesus to the Gentiles, he was giving something holy to the unholy. It would have been different had he been converting these Gentiles to Judaism

first, circumcising them and teaching them to live according to *torah*, but as we've seen in Romans, Paul was doing just the opposite. *Torah* is fulfilled by faith in Jesus, not by works of the law. That really irked a lot of Jewish Christians.

It would have been very easy for Paul to turn his back on his fellow Jews. His God-given mission, after all, was to the Gentiles. His mission was to travel across Asia Minor and Greece to announce that Jesus is Lord. He was headed to Rome and then to Spain—and who knows where after that. “Forget Jerusalem,” he could have said. He'd go on preaching to the Gentiles that, in Jesus, they were fellow-heirs with Israel and on equal standing with them before the God of Israel. But, no. Paul needed to make that same gospel truth clear with the Jews, too. What better way to do it than by taking up a collection from the Gentile churches for the benefit of the Jerusalem church? And, because it's easy for us to forget that things were very different then, considering the danger Paul was putting himself in to deliver this collection. There were no bank transfers. There were no traveller's cheques. Paul and his companions had to carry the collection—a large amount of silver and gold coins—halfway across the empire. They could have been robbed and left for dead a hundred times. But Paul dedicated himself to delivering this offering himself, despite the danger, to the very people who had opposed him most strongly.

Brothers and Sisters, there's a profound lesson in Paul's example. One of the shameful things that Christians routinely do is use their money to manipulate churches and church leaders. It's very true that money talks. You can withhold money when you disagree with something as a way of trying to force your own way. (And when a church or its leaders are in grievous error, abandoning Jesus and the gospel, we

may be justified in doing that.) But Paul did just the opposite. And in doing that, he witnessed the gospel. He witnessed God's generous love for people who opposed him, rejected him, and who were totally undeserving of his love. Paul understood—as he's written right here in Romans—that we have actively opposed God, but he has loved us anyway, even giving his own Son to die for our sake. God's grave became his model for dealing with these brothers and sisters who had rarely been anything else than a pain in his neck. Brothers and Sisters, even when we're in the right and others are in the wrong, they may be the very people we should be helping. We need to stop and consider that helping those who have opposed us may model God's grace, not only to them, but to the watching world.

Paul was very eager to show—not to just to tell, but to show in a practical way with this offering—that Jewish and Gentile believers are part of the same covenant family. He's urged the Gentile churches to contribute to the welfare of the Jewish church, because, through Jesus, the Gentiles have come to share in the spiritual blessings of Israel. This was a chance to show their indebtedness. Paul saw this gift of money as modelling the doctrine of justification by faith that he's laid out in Romans. The gift reminds the Gentiles Christians that they are branches grafted into Israel's vine. It's also going to confront the Jewish Christians with the fact that their Jewish Messiah, whom they proclaim as Lord, *really* is just that: not just Lord of Israel, but Lord of the Gentiles, too. And for just this reason, Paul expected opposition. Look at verses 30-33:

I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf, that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be

acceptable to the saints, so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company. May the God of peace be with you all. Amen.

Paul's first concern was his fellow *unbelieving* Jews. Remember who Paul was. He had been a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish governing body. At one point he rounded up Christians so that they could be put on trial before the Jewish leaders. It was bad enough that he'd become a follower of Jesus, but it was even worse that he now associated primarily with Gentiles. They saw Paul as a traitor, a heretic, a blasphemer. They saw him as a dangerous character who wasn't just *potentially* leading Jews astray. He was *actively* doing so. Paul was a high profile character. People knew who he was. He couldn't just slip into Jerusalem unnoticed to deliver this offering.

At the same time, assuming he wasn't stopped by the *unbelieving* Jewish authorities, he still had to contend with rejection from within the community of believing Jewish Christians. Again, there were leaders in the Jerusalem church who actively and vehemently opposed Paul. Even if someone else delivered the money, many would have found it hard to accept money sent by Gentiles. Who knew what how it might be tainted? Did it come from clean or unclean sources? The Jews associated Gentiles with idolatry and many were suspicious even of Christian Gentiles.

And so Paul enlists the Roman Christians in their first joint venture with him: “Pray for me,” he says. His calling is to visit them in Rome so that they can support him as he carries the gospel to the West, but first he's got to go in the opposite direction. It's not going to be easy. Before he left, Paul knew it would be a physically taxing and potentially dangerous trip—and that was just to get to Judea. Once he

got there he had to contend with the Jewish authorities. If he got past them, the church in Jerusalem might not even receive the gift. So Paul asks for prayer.

We know from Acts that Paul was right to ask for their prayers. The trip was one disaster after another. Paul's arrival sparked riots. He was beaten. He was arrested and put on trial. He was a prisoner in Judea for two years and maybe longer, before he finally appealed his case directly to Caesar. Then, under armed guard, he set sail for Rome. On the way he was shipwrecked. But he did accomplish his mission. The offering made it to Jerusalem where it seems to have made a difference. And Paul, after many trials, eventually made it to Rome. Through it all Paul displayed a measured calm. He was confident in the good news about Jesus. He was confident that God was sovereign. And he was confident that his faithful brothers and sisters in Rome and elsewhere were praying for him. In verse 33, Paul blesses them: "May the God of peace be with you all." I expect that Paul was confident in giving them that blessing because he was so aware of the God of peace being with him.

Brothers and Sisters, we need to be like both Paul and the Roman Christians. Like Paul, trusting in God's sovereignty and the power of the good news about Jesus, we need to be going out, we need to be crossing boundaries, we need to be proclaiming Jesus and his death and resurrection. We need to declare the royal summons and call the world to submit in faith to Creation's true Lord. And we need to be living the gospel—and even looking for new ways to make it real to people in practical ways as Paul did with this offering. We need to be looking for way to demonstrate to the people we know that, for example, money is not our god and that we, instead, trust in the God who gave himself as a sacrifice to forgive us to

make us new. And we need to pray. It's not easy to face opposition. It's not easy to live by faith ourselves. It's not easy to offer up ourselves as living sacrifices. So pray. Pray for your own faithfulness and your own witness. Lay yourself on God's altar each morning in prayer and pray that his hands will keep you on the altar, giving yourself in faith. And pray for your brothers and sisters. Ask God to give them strength—strength for the day-to-day things and courage to take advantage of every opportunity for the gospel to be lived and proclaimed. Pray for God's peace. Pray for *real* peace. Many of us are notorious for laying low and having it easy or not being disturbed because we don't proclaim the gospel and we don't stir up the sort of trouble that Paul stirred up. And then we think that God's giving us peace. Friends, that's not peace. That's complacency. Real peace is what we see in Paul as he undertook a dangerous mission for people who didn't even like him in a place where other people were ready to beat and imprison him. Real peace is seen in the confidence to pursue difficult ministry in the face of adversity, while resting in the righteousness—the covenant faithfulness of God.

Let us pray: Father, in the Collect we asked for strength to withstand the word, the flesh, and the devil and with pure hearts and minds to follow you. Remind us that to follow you means challenging the world. Remind us that to follow you means giving up shallow notions of peace in order to confront the false gods of this world with lordship of Jesus, with his cross, and with his resurrection. Give us gospel courage, Father. And give us your peace, not as we lay low, but as we put that gospel courage into action. We ask this through Jesus our Lord. Amen.