

Trust and Integrity

2 Corinthians 8:16-24

We're back to 2 Cor. 8 this morning and it's a chapter about Christian giving. I mentioned last week that giving is often misunderstood and can be accompanied by guilt and coercion. But after seeing what Paul wrote we could see that it's really supposed to be joyful, willing and free – an act of worship. In giving we are not only meeting a need, but imitating Christ who, though he was rich, for our sakes became poor, so that through his poverty we might become rich. He gave his life for us and we have the privilege to imitate him by giving to help people in need and support the work of his mission. As God provides, we take some of that and set it aside, so we're ready to give. We aim at joyful, worshipful, willful giving. This morning we're going to see one of the things that's been a major barrier to that, that's put a damper on joyful giving since the beginning, and it has to do with the mishandling of church finances.

I went to an Alliance Pastors' Conference a few years ago and as part of that conference we visited some of the nearby church plants that had started in the past couple years. It was cool to see how God was using new churches to reach those communities and bring hope and light through the gospel.

But at one of those church plants the pastor told us about a very difficult situation they just went through. The person they elected to be the church treasurer had actually been pocketing some of the money and hiding it in the books. She reported expenses that never happened and gave that money to herself instead. She intended to pay it back, but never did, and after several months someone noticed something in the reports that didn't add up. After an investigation it was discovered that she had taken \$63,000 from that new church in the past year. People were shocked and wondered if they could recover financially, but God intervened and they made it through.

Unfortunately, that's not the only story like that. Stories of fraud and embezzlement or the mishandling of finances in churches and ministries are pretty common, and it's easy to get sucked in. We hear someone make an emotional appeal for some kind of ministry or need and we decide to give and then find out that person wasn't quite who we thought they were and the money wasn't really used to meet that need.

It's an unfortunate occurrence in our world today that's caused a lot of mistrust when it comes to Christian giving. It discourages joy, freedom, and worship in giving for a lot of people. Can you trust anyone anymore? What kinds of things should you look for in a church or Christian organization so you can give joyfully and confidently? Our passage for today will look at some of the things that Paul did to build trust and integrity into the process of receiving a large love offering and we'll see things to look for as we grow in the grace of giving.

We're studying 2 Corinthians 8-9 which is all about Christian giving. It's written into a unique situation that we saw last week and gives us good principles to apply to our lives today. Paul was collecting a large love offering among the Gentile churches to send to the saints in Judea who were struggling with famine and poverty. The offering would not only meet that need, but it would also help break down walls of hostility that were still dividing Jewish and Gentile Christians.

Paul had invited the Corinthians to participate in meeting the need and they eagerly wanted to help. But a year had gone by and a lot had happened, and the offering had been put on hold. False teachers had come into the church and were trying to undermine Paul's credibility. After painful letters and visits from Paul, the church finally removed one of his primary opponents and renewed their commitment to him, and now it was time to get back to the collection. The offering in Corinth was especially important because Paul had boasted about their eagerness to help to many different churches, so now it was really important for them to follow through.

So we saw last week how he urged them to complete the work they started, and he used the example of the Macedonians to stir them back into action. He was sending Titus to get things going and complete the work before he got there. And now we get to a passage where he seems to be reinforcing their trust in the management of the offering. I think Paul knew it might be difficult for some of them to trust him because of the false accusations of his opponents. So he took careful measures in the way it was collected that will help us see some good things to look for when we're considering what churches or ministries to give to.

2 Corinthians 8:16-24

But thanks be to God, who put into the heart of Titus the same earnest care I have for you. ¹⁷ For he not only accepted our appeal, but being himself very earnest he is going to you of his own accord. ¹⁸ With him we are sending the brother who is famous among all the churches for his preaching of the gospel. ¹⁹ And not only that, but he has been appointed by the churches to travel with us as we carry out this act of grace that is being ministered by us, for the glory of the Lord himself and to show our good will. ²⁰ We take this course so that no one should blame us about this generous gift that is being administered by us, ²¹ for we aim at what is honorable not only in the Lord's sight but also in the sight of man. ²² And with them we are sending our brother whom we have often tested and found earnest in many matters, but who is now more earnest than ever because of his great confidence in you. ²³ As for Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker for your benefit. And as for our brothers, they are messengers of the churches, the glory of Christ. ²⁴ So give proof before the churches of your love and of our boasting about you to these men.

What Paul does in these verses is takes time to commend the three men he was sending to Corinth to help with the collection. These were the men who would have shown up with this letter and here Paul explains why he sent them and why they could trust them. Earlier in chapter 8 he told them that he and his team wanted Titus to go back to finish helping them take up the love offering, and now he expands on that a little more.

He gives a brief commendation for each of them. The first was Titus, whom they already knew very well. I think that was one of the reasons Paul wanted him to go and lead the team. Personal relationships and familiarity were really important to build trust. They knew Titus and knew they could trust him. Paul acknowledged that Titus cared very much about them and was eager to go back to them to complete the work.

The second was a man who was famous among all the churches for preaching the gospel. His identity is unknown, but people often suggest it could be Luke. He was a well-known preacher and minister of the gospel. He had also been appointed by the churches for the very purpose of accompanying Paul and his team as they gathered the love offering. So he had a different kind of credibility based on a solid reputation and the approval among many

churches. The third was one who had ministered with Paul and been around the block a few times. His faith and character had been tested on many occasions and he proved to be earnest in many matters. He also demonstrated a renewed zeal for and confidence in the Corinthians.

So these were the three that Paul was sending. He also mentions in verse 23 that Titus was his partner and fellow worker, which carried a certain degree of prestige since Paul was an Apostle, and the other two were messengers of the other churches.

Why would Paul write these things in this letter? I already mentioned that due to the accusations of his opponents, some of the people in Corinth were probably having a hard time trusting him, and I think that was the primary reason. It was a matter of trust and integrity. We see this in what he writes in Verses 20-21: *“We take this course so that no one should blame us about this generous gift that is being administered by us,²¹ for we aim at what is honorable not only in the Lord's sight but also in the sight of man.”* In other words, Paul sent these men and described their qualifications in order to be above reproach when it came to this offering. He didn't want any accusations to have any ground to stand on. He wanted the process to be honorable to God, and also to man. He wanted everyone to be able to see that everything going on about this offering was above board so they could be confident in joyfully giving.

Paul already had opponents in Corinth who wanted to ruin his reputation and turn the church against him and the gospel. They would probably try to make accusations against him when it came to this offering. There was also a lot of skepticism among the Jews about his ministry to the Gentiles and probably some who would like to find reasons to leave the dividing walls of hostility in place. So Paul was careful to implement a process that would be trustworthy and have a high degree of integrity, and leave no room for scrutiny and accusation. He sent a team of trusted, well-known, proven men to oversee the collection and handle the finances. They had a proven track-record, and because there were three of them, there was a high level of accountability.

As I mentioned earlier, there have been many unfortunate stories of fraud and embezzlement in the church. How does that happen? How does a church treasurer take \$63,000 from a church plant? It's usually because there's one

person who gets control of the money and doesn't have enough accountability in place. They may not even intend to take any money, but the temptation and opportunity are there and eventually it can lead to compromise, a little siphoning off the top, and before you know it, it's thousands of dollars.

I think this passage gives us a biblical precedent for integrity when it comes to handling church or ministry finances and some important principles to follow and look for so that our joy and worship in giving isn't hindered. We should have qualified and trusted people handling the finances, and there should be more than one so there can be accountability and a separation of duties. These are the things we practice at East Lincoln and you should see them in any ministry you support.

The Lord has given some of you a burden to raise funds for a particular need or situation. That's great. But rather than just collecting the money yourself and setting up the potential for temptation or questions of integrity, do what Paul did. Find some trustworthy people to handle the money so all things will be above reproach and there will be no temptation and people will feel confident the money will get where it's supposed to.

These are the responsibilities of churches and ministry leaders. For us as givers, I think this passage shows us important things to look for when we give money to a church or ministry. Do they have trusted and qualified people in place who are handling the money? Do they have more than one person? Is there a separation of duties?

Even in a world where fraud and embezzlement happen, we can feel confident in giving to the mission when we see these things in place. We can experience God's grace in joyful and worshipful giving that glorifies our Savior and Lord.