

## **"Eager Givers"**

*Stewardship '17, part 2*

2 Corinthians 8:16-9:5

You are in the right place this morning. You are not here by accident. If you look around you, you will see people who are here to worship God and encourage each other. This is a good place to be, and I thank you for honoring God with your presence. We cannot be the church alone.

Would you please pray with me? Lord, we know you have something to say, and we are ready to listen. Send us your Holy Spirit to move our hearts, shape our minds, and refresh our souls. Show us what it really means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, and give us the strength to follow him all of our days. May our words and our thoughts be pleasing to you, O God. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

When I was a freshman in college I joined the marching band. You can see all the goofy gear I still have. The fact was, before I even set foot on campus, I knew I was going to march. I was so excited when I came back from my first week at band camp, I admit I made a nuisance of myself. I asked everyone if they wanted to join NUMB. Even though I don't believe I personally recruited anyone, I know that we added several band members because everyone was eager to see the band grow. We had found a good thing, and we were eager to share it.

It was difficult to sustain that enthusiasm and eagerness as the years went on. Sure, going to the Rose Bowl helps, but by my senior year, the team lost all of its home game and went winless in the conference. I had to make a choice at that time if I was still going to continue the enthusiasm I had as a freshman.

If you listened closely to our liturgist, you heard the words “enthusiasm”, “eagerness”, “zealous”, and “confidence” several times in today’s scripture. There is a strong connection between our attitudes and our giving. Money is difficult to talk about because it is close to our heart. How we use money shows our values and beliefs more than anything else.

That is why we need God’s word. Jesus talked about money – because he knew what it can do to our hearts. Paul talked about money – to keep our priorities straight. If we look closely at Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians, we can learn some valuable lessons about giving and eagerness.

Last week, we read how Paul encouraged the church in Corinth to keep their promise to support the Christians in Jerusalem. There were some issues. The Corinthians had been the first to give, setting an example for the other churches, but then they started to lose their enthusiasm. They had some faith problems. So Paul wrote this letter to explain why their giving mattered and to encourage the Corinthians to finish what they started. We came to the conclusion that we should all keep our promises, especially when it comes to giving.

I want to pick back up in the scripture at 2 Cor 8:16, where Paul explains a little more why he sent Titus to help the Corinthians. The main question I want us to ask ourselves today is, how eager are we to give?

Paul was concerned for Corinth, and thanked God that Titus felt the same. God put this concern in Titus’s heart. We get the sense that Titus was really eager to come to Corinth. He probably stood by Paul, jumping up and down, waving his hands, saying, “Me! Pick me! I’ll go to Corinth with this letter and help them with the offering!” How wonderful is it that Titus decided to go and encourage his

sisters and brothers in Christ, not because Paul told him to go, but because Titus decided to on his own initiative?

Stop for a moment and ask yourself, are you that concerned for anyone in another church? Not just here in our own congregation. How eager are we to go and serve, to enter situations that might not be neat and tidy? That’s one truth of discipleship you cannot deny. Jesus said, “Go!” Titus met this challenge with joy.

In fact, Titus did not even go alone. His offer to travel apparently encouraged two other brothers to travel. These three men were chosen by the church (v. 19). It was an honor and a privilege for them to go and show their eagerness to help Corinth.

If you know anything about 1<sup>st</sup> century Corinth, the fact that these men volunteered to go help should surprise you. Corinth was a seaside merchant town with a spectacular temple to the pagan love-goddess Aphrodite. It was a rough place for a new Christian. In fact, the two letters to the Corinthians speak to all the problems this church was having with the culture around them. Titus volunteered to go where there was a reputation for fighting. That is a clear testament of his faith.

How eager are you to go places where there is trouble? Better yet, when someone sticks their neck out for Christ, do you esteem them in the same way the churches honored Titus and his two companions? Paul says that they were not only trying to please God, they were trying to do what was right in the eyes of people. That is a very difficult thing to do.

What is really going on here? Paul, Titus, and these other Christians are really taking a risk. They are saying, to borrow a phrase, “Corinthians, show me the money!” Look at verse 8:24. “Therefore show these men the proof of your

love and the reason for our pride in you, so that the churches can see it.” That is a bold statement. Paul is telling the Corinthians, “Look, I love you. Jesus loves you. There are so many great things about you, so much, that we boast about you to other churches. Don’t let us down.”

This letter is not just about getting the Corinthians to keep their promise with the offering. There is so much more at stake here. Paul goes on in chapter 9 to talk about how the other churches are becoming more like Christ in their giving because of what the Corinthians started. Look at 2 Cor 9:2 – “For I know your eagerness to help, and I have been boasting about it to the Macedonians, telling them that since last year you in Achaia were ready to give; and your enthusiasm has stirred most of them to action.”

Have you ever stirred someone to action with your example? Has your faith ever prompted someone else to become more like Christ? I don’t ask this as some sort of egotistical question. It is all about Jesus. However, we are Jesus’s disciples. We follow his example, so that others can follow our example. Who is looking at you, and what are they learning?

Paul knows that he is staking his own reputation on the Corinthians. He admits that he will be embarrassed if the Corinthians are not generous and loving. (9:4) He is trying hard to prepare them, to fan the flames of faith that he knows are there. “There is no reason to write to you,” Paul says, ironically. (9:1) In other words, the Corinthians already know what they should do. Paul simply wants to know, how will the gift be given? Look at the last verse in our section, 9:5. Will it be “a generous gift,” or “one grudgingly given”?

Our eagerness encourages others, especially when we give. It is like ripples in the water. One stone, one splash, radiates out and creates more ripples. Often

that means taking a chance, taking a risk. Yet that is what Christ calls us to do, to take that first step.

Paul does not write this letter as a guilt trip. He has a heart of compassion and concern for the church. He wants their giving to honor the Lord and serve others. Paul knows that enthusiasm is contagious. And as your pastor, I believe the same things.

We do not hold pledge drives at Bellaire Community United Methodist church. Our budget is simply based on our giving trends. And let me tell you some really good news. Our general fund giving has increased over the last three years. In other words, the money we spend on salaries, utilities, and ministry has gone up each and every year since 2014. I looked up the numbers. In 2014, general fund giving (excluding special offerings for specific missions) was about \$141,000. In 2015, it was \$148,000. In 2016, it was \$154,000. Our goal this year is \$159,000, and as of last Sunday, we were about \$1000 ahead of budget. That is great, especially since November and December usually are a bit under budget as some snowbirds leave. Over that last four years, we have increased our giving by an average of about \$5,000 each year, not including missions.

Does that excite you? I am excited! This congregation believes in what Jesus does through our ministry, and is not afraid to support it.

This weekend, Mary, Amanda, Katja and I attend the Reach Summit, a church conference about growing healthy churches. I loved hearing how other churches got excited about reaching new people, practicing hospitality and being generous. There was a deep longing inside me. I asked, “Is that us? Are we excited? Are we eager? Does it show? Do we really know our purpose – to make

and nurture disciple of Jesus Christ?" Or are some of us content just being comfortable?

I was challenged as a leader to be a better example of generosity and enthusiasm. So I am going to borrow an idea I learned this weekend. Malachi 3:10 says, "Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it." The Bible indicates that tithing, giving 10% of your income, is God's goal for our giving. This is what I believe God commands me to do, and that is how I calculate my church offering.

Here is my challenge and my promise. The challenge: Begin tithing to the church, for at least three months. The promise: If during that time, you cannot afford your necessities - food, rent, utilities - I will personally refund your gifts from my own pocket. It sounds crazy, even to me. But God says he tests us and promises to provide for us. What kind of leader am I if I do not help you achieve what God wants? So that's my challenge and my promise.

This means that you will have to be accountable for your giving. You will have to use the envelopes, give online, or write a check, so our finance team can track it. Next week I am going to hand out giving challenge cards to the whole congregation. These will be for you to keep. On them, you will write your commitments to the church, in prayer, in inviting others, in serving, and in giving, Put them in your bible, tape them to your bathroom mirror. The point is to be eager and set the example, so that others follow.

The church council has to figure out next year's budget by November. We base it partly on what we all gave last year, and partly on what we think, by faith,

we can do next year. Can we continue our pattern of giving, an increase of \$3,000 or more? It will depend on our eagerness to serve God in this church. In the end, it is not a question of money; it is a question of faith. Paul wanted to know if he would be proud of the Corinthians. I believe we should ask ourselves, and each other, the same question.

### Memory verse

2 Corinthians 9:7

“Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”

### Reflection questions

1. Who is someone that has inspired you?
2. Do you consider yourself an eager giver? What causes inspire you to give?
3. When have you been a reluctant giver? What caused you to have that attitude?
4. How do you calculate what you give to God through the church? Is God calling on to be more faithful to your promise?
5. If you would like to take Pastor Eric up on his offer to “risk-free tithe,” please send him an email at [eric.bcumc@gmail.com](mailto:eric.bcumc@gmail.com)