

Begging to give: 2 Corinthians 8:7-15

by [William R. O'Brien](#) in the [June 14, 2003](#) issue

"The past is not over," said Odessa Woolfolk of the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute. Speaking to my divinity school class, Woolfolk spoke of systems that continue to oppress and seriously limit access to resources that are basic to any human being. With slavery a thing of the past, with segregation banned, with the right to vote for everyone, what is the problem? It is access.

All families need access to adequate housing, a healthy diet, good education and security. But for huge numbers of people, those kinds of needs are fantasy. Over a billion persons live on less than one dollar a day, and many get far less than that. Simple shelter, clean drinking water and basic health care are not a part of their lives.

The paralyzing effect of affluence takes its toll on middle- and upper-class people. Multiple choices in housing, food, education and entertainment blind many of us to the "invisible" communities—at home and abroad. When those communities do make it onto radar screens, we often blame the needy for their own problems. Some of us say we must quit throwing money away in foreign aid or domestic welfare. In the U.S., the government turns a friendly face to faith communities and asks them to meet the overwhelming needs of the poor, the homeless and the dispossessed.

I love the story of the churches in Macedonia. Paul refers to Macedonian Christians, or the province, 16 times in six of his letters. Three of his letters were to churches in Macedonia, a prosperous region. The Via Egnatia was a major east-west route that ran through it. Although the province enjoyed economic advantage, Christians in Macedonia were extremely poor and had experienced some kind of severe trial. Yet when faced with the opportunity to help the beleaguered church in Jerusalem, their response was magnanimous.

Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, reminding its members of the offering they had begun collecting a year earlier for the Jerusalem church. He had bragged about them to the Macedonian believers, and now he asked them to hurry up and complete their part of the offering. Paul wanted the Corinthians to know about the grace that God

had given to the Macedonian churches, about how their overflowing joy and extreme poverty had welled up in rich generosity. They begged for the opportunity to share in this service to the Jerusalem Christians, and then wound up giving beyond their ability.

The secret to that kind of attitude lay in their commitment to the Lord first, then to their leaders, including Paul. Somewhere early in the discipleship process they must have been taught that the earth is the Lord's and everything in it. They owned nothing. They were ambassadors of another kingdom, therefore they were stewards of all that passed through their hands.

I imagine Paul taught the Macedonian believers the same thing he shared with the Ephesians. "Do something useful with your hands, that you may have something to share with those in need." Evangelist Tom Skinner, author of *Black and Free*, believed it was a duty to teach the poor church to give from the very outset. Poverty does not negate the role of stewardship. Skinner said that if a church assumes a "poor me" attitude and is only on the receiving end, it will not start giving even when it is more able to do so. Clearly, Macedonia was a model to those more able to give.

Even as Paul compared the earnestness of the Corinthians with that of the Macedonians, he ultimately was comparing their love with that of the Master. He reminded them of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich yet for their sakes he became poor, so that they through his poverty might become rich.

Paul explained to the Philippian church that all believers should have the same attitude as that of Christ, who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant. He was exalted through obedience—even obedience to death.

Today I marvel at churches in Latin America, Africa and Asia that are 21st-century Macedonias. A few years ago I was with a group in Nanjing, China, for a dialogue with leaders of the China Christian Council. On Sunday we visited various churches in the city. An older Chinese woman now living in Los Angeles chose to visit a church across the river from Nanjing, a poor church composed of farmers. The 900 who were present for the service wanted to hear a word from their sister from the states, so Mrs. Chang brought greetings from her church in Los Angeles. She told how the Lord had added many to their church and how they were currently building a large

new addition. Then after a word of blessing for this church, she took her seat. At the close of the worship time, Mrs. Chang was called back to the front. The pastor said her words had thrilled their hearts. They wanted her to have the morning offering to help with the new building in Los Angeles—about \$140. When their overflowing joy welled up in generosity, they gave beyond their ability.

One might say that the American church did not need that money. They were not in the position of the Jerusalem church that was languishing. But they did need the reminder not to lose sight of the real need of people, either in LA or in China, for the past is not over.

The answer just might lie in churches that are begging—begging for the privilege of standing with those in need and applying a holistic gospel to the systems that deprive people of their dignity.