

Pressed into service: 2 Corinthians 8:7-15

Why does Paul resort to both shame and pride to raise money for the Jerusalem church?

by [Daniel Harrell](#) in the [June 27, 2006](#) issue

In the mid-1980s I attended a church that still honored “Money Sunday,” a practice begun in the 1950s. Once a year members of the congregation gathered to make financial pledges to support missions efforts. As the pledges were collected, the minister would read the amounts aloud from the pulpit: “Here’s one for \$50. . . . Here’s another for \$100 and one for \$1,000!” Occasionally a pledge came in for, say, \$10,000, eliciting all sorts of approving oohs and aahs from the congregation, and for the rare pledge of \$50,000 the organist would leap from his pew and play a rousing fanfare of “Great Is Thy Faithfulness.” If the financial goal had not been reached by the end of the service, the minister would send the offering plate back around, shaming the members into emptying their pockets of everything except the subway token they needed to get home.

I was appalled by the process—I felt as if I were in some money-grabbing religious TV show. Granted, none of the missions money was ever kept by the church. Generous amounts of money went to support causes outside the church: campus ministry, urban ministry, medical and relief work, and church planting and Bible translation around the globe. Still, I was relieved when Money Sundays ended. At that point in my life, I agreed with Paul that “God loves a cheerful giver” and does not ask for a giver to be coerced by shame or pride (2 Cor. 9:7).

So why does Paul himself resort to both shame and pride to raise money for the financially troubled Jerusalem church in these passages? First he flaunts the superior generosity of the Macedonian church so as to embarrass the Corinthians into giving, and then he flatters them for their excellent Christian virtue in an effort to spur them to give even more.

Perhaps Paul is pressing them not only to give, but to understand why giving is so important. The God whom we worship is, after all, a God who gives. To be a Christian

is to receive grace. To receive grace entails becoming a conduit of grace through forgiveness, words of kindness and acts of generosity toward others. Like manna from heaven, grace cannot be hoarded. Like gossip, we can't keep grace to ourselves. If the grace of Jesus truly resides in us, it won't be able to stay there. The God who cheerfully gives loves a cheerful giver. Eagerness and giving together are signs of the presence of Christ inside. And inasmuch as Jesus is the eager giving standard, how can anybody hold back anything?

Of course, Paul knew that nobody can give totally like Christ. We are not the Christ. We don't have divinity to divest ourselves of. We can give our lives, but that won't save the world. "Match actions to your eagerness," Paul writes in 8:11, "but do it according to your means. Give what you can." Because if you're eager, you'll give all you can. Paul's not offering us an out; he's creating a boundary for us. We give all we can, just not so much that we become financially needy ourselves. The goal of giving is not a vow of poverty but a vow of generosity for the sake of equality, sufficiency and justice.

It's not right that nearly 3 billion people live on less than two dollars a day. It's not right that a few hundred millionaires own as much wealth as the world's poorest 2.5 billion people. It's not right that 30,000 children die every day due to poverty or that in Boston, where I live, there are over 6,000 homeless men, women and children. Even in our own congregations, some are struggling to make ends meet. It's no secret that if all Christians on earth tithed 10 percent of their after-tax/after-debt income, world poverty could be obliterated.

Yet for Christians, equality and justice are measured not only monetarily, but also relationally. Christ died for all in order to reconcile the world to himself. Giving and forgiving go hand in hand. Although the Jerusalem church was in dire need of financial assistance, Paul's appeal for help was directed at gentile churches. Justice is both economic and relational—even racial. Being reconciled to God, giving to your neighbors and forgiving your enemies, living at peace because everyone's needs are met—is there anything that feels closer to heaven? No wonder Paul lays it on so thick, using every lever at his disposal: Shame. Flattery. Fear. He did whatever it took to get the Corinthians to eagerly give because that's what people reconciled to God do.

But how could the Corinthians become eager givers if Paul was twisting their arms? If motivation matters, forcing me to give only makes my motivation fake. You may

be able to scare me or guilt me into giving, but you can't guilt me into being cheerful or eager to do it.

We started a group in our church devoted to serving the homeless who live on Boston Common. I had a hard time getting this group together. Despite the number of people who expressed frustration with our church's being all talk and no action when it came to the homeless, actually moving from talk to action proved scary. I was frustrated, and despite my reluctance to coerce anyone, I decided to see if I couldn't press a few people to sign up. The good news is that this worked: we now have a group that regularly serves food, provides clothes and leads a worship service outside each week. Being pressed to serve did not tarnish our motivation, but instead resulted in more of us knowing the joy of service. We were pushed to be true to the people we already are in Christ.