

Paul's Expectations of Generosity

BY KELLY D. LIEBENGOOD

True generosity requires us to give to those in need and make a place for them in our gatherings. Such generosity, Paul reminds us, is enabled by the transforming grace of God manifested in the self-emptying life of Jesus Christ and made accessible through the life-giving Spirit.

Growing public interest in the alleviation of poverty is reminding many in the Church that the Bible has quite a lot to say about God's expectations regarding how and for whom we use our resources. For example, central to the Pentateuch's vision of the good life are instructions concerning social justice, economics, and care for the poor and vulnerable of society.¹ In the prophetic materials, the people of Israel are criticized for failing to use their power and resources to benefit orphans, widows, and the vulnerable of society – that is, for failing to uphold the vision of the good life found in the Pentateuch.² Social justice, economics, and concern for the poor are common themes in the wisdom literature, the teachings of Jesus, the Book of Acts, the Epistle of James, and the Book of Revelation.³ But what about Paul, the apostle who has written almost half of the New Testament?⁴ What does he have to contribute to the witness of Scripture about how God expects us to use our material resources?

Many biblical scholars and not a few Christians are rather critical of the apostle because he does not appear to say much of anything on the matter, certainly not enough to promote any kind of meaningful action.⁵ To add insult to injury, some of Paul's writings can be interpreted as supporting the oft-heard mantra for self-reliance and social responsibility, "God helps those who help themselves." A case in point is 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13, where Paul warns his readers to keep away from people who are living in idleness.

In addition, he orders the idle to work hard (day and night) in order to earn their own living so that they will not be a burden to others. He even goes so far as to say that those who refuse to work should be refused food. And he roots all of this instruction in the way of life that he and his companions passed down to the Thessalonians when they were visiting (“we did not eat anyone’s bread without paying for it”; 2 Thessalonians 3:8).

But is this a charitable reading of Paul? Is it really the case, as many have suggested, that Paul has nothing meaningful to contribute to the larger picture of what the Scriptures teach us about the place of social justice, poverty, and generosity in God’s economy?

“IDLENESS” AND UNCHARACTERISTIC GENEROSITY

Let’s begin by revisiting 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13 and attending to its social setting more closely: “idleness” is only made possible in a social context where people’s needs are being met by someone else. That is, idleness is dependent upon generosity. This might seem like an obvious observation, but it turns out to be a significant point when we locate the issue of idleness within the realities of the social world in which the Thessalonians lived.

In first-century Greco-Roman urban centers such as Thessalonica, there was no meaningful concern for the poor and needy, nor were there any mechanisms, or “safety nets,” for aiding those who found themselves in any sort of economic hardship. It is estimated that just over half of the population lived at or below subsistence levels in these urban centers.⁶ Given their precarious circumstances, many of these people died prematurely from either malnutrition or some physical ailment that was precipitated by their dire conditions. Approximately another one quarter of the urban population lived with only modest reserves. Since these people were vulnerable to economic insecurity (in part because there was no economic safety net), they were unable or unwilling to extend generosity to others; if they did, they might fall into a condition of subsistence living from which there would be no way for them (and their families) to recover. As a result, approximately eighty percent of the population consistently experienced economic vulnerability and insecurity and were not in a position to offer any meaningful generosity to others. It was therefore incumbent upon the elites in these communities to provide resources that would enable the poor and vulnerable to emerge from their destitute financial circumstances and concomitant hardships; if there was to be any sort of safety net in urban centers, it would have to come from the minority that had managed to accumulate most of the material resources that were available.

Weather-beaten, ancient honorary inscriptions still bear witness to the common practices of generosity of the elite in Greco-Roman urban centers in the first century.⁷ But it is important to underscore that the generosity that was practiced by and even expected of those who had reserves was blatantly self-serving. In the extremely competitive social construct of honor

and shame, extravagant giving (for civic monuments, public works projects such as theaters, roads, water systems, or public baths, opulent banquets, sponsorship of gladiator games, and so on) was for the dual purpose of enhancing one's status among those who mattered and for expanding one's economic opportunities.⁸ The startling reality was that most of the material resources that were available in Greco-Roman urban centers were harvested or extracted by those living at or below subsistence levels, but distributed among the elite. "Trickledown economics" was not in operation in the world in which the New Testament was written; instead, most resources were channeled upward and then distributed among those who lived with substantial reserves and unshakeable economic security.

This social reality sheds considerable light on Paul's instruction in 2 Thessalonians 3. Some people were "idle" in the community of Jesus followers at Thessalonica precisely because they could assume that others in that community would provide for their needs. This, as we can now see, is an uncharacteristic presumption for anyone to make in a Greco-Roman urban center at that time. It thus becomes apparent that one of the primary characteristics of this particular community of Jesus followers in Thessalonica was uncharacteristic generosity towards those in need. And it appears that this uncharacteristic generosity was being abused by some.

When we read 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13 in its proper social setting, then, we see a community that has engaged in countercultural acts of generosity (and for a long enough time for some to abuse it). Paul admonishes the Thessalonians to continue to uphold the practice of caring for those who are *truly* in need by exhorting them to "not grow weary of doing good" (3:13, my translation). In Paul's mind, what is at stake is the unnecessary squandering of limited resources for those who are able to provide for themselves. But generosity is never taken off the table; it is a non-negotiable for the community of Jesus followers, even if it is being abused.

When Paul writes to the Thessalonian church, generosity is never taken off the table. It is a non-negotiable for the community of Jesus followers, even if it is being abused by the "idle" who are able to provide for themselves.

In a different Christian community, we see a similar scenario of abused uncharacteristic generosity. In 1 Timothy 5:3-16, Paul urges his readers to "honor widows who are really widows" (5:3). The basis for his admonishment is not simply that people should be self-sufficient and work hard, but rather that abuse of generosity takes away resources that can and should be appropriated to assist those who are truly in need (5:16). And as he did with the Thessalonians, Paul

once again upholds the fundamental practice of generosity within the community of Jesus followers by exhorting those with access to material resources, namely the minority rich, to channel those goods downward: “As for those who...are rich...do good, be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share” (6:17-18).

REDEFINING “GOOD WORKS”

In considering Paul’s vision of and instructions for generosity within the community of Jesus followers, it is important to understand what he means when he speaks of doing “good works” (2 Thessalonians 3:13; 1 Timothy 6:17-18). Galatians 6 is instructive; there Paul, as he customarily does in his letters, alerts his readers with a double referential conjunction (*ara oun*) that what he is about to say encapsulates what he has been urging them to do thus far: “*Therefore, then*, whenever we have opportunity, let us work the good for all, and especially for those of the household of faith” (6:10, my translation). In this summarizing charge, Paul intimates that a community of Jesus followers ought to be characterized by the overarching ethic of “working/doing the good.” As indicated in Galatians 6:6 (“Those who are taught the word must share in all good things with their teacher”), we know that Paul’s concept of “the good” contains an economic dimension, the sharing of material resources. This sharing of material resources, Paul argues within the larger framework of the letter, is a natural extension of belonging to Jesus, who he poignantly describes at the beginning of the letter as the one “who gave himself for our sins to set us free from this present evil age” characterized by greed and selfish ambition (1:4).

When we follow Paul’s larger argument in Galatians, we see that his primary concern is that the Galatian Christians be characterized not by the marks of the flesh (that is, by circumcision and works that bring self-enhancing glory and honor), but rather by generosity that is generated by the life-giving Spirit of the self-giving Jesus. Paul develops this by connecting the work of the Spirit with freedom, and freedom with the enabling to love one’s neighbor. In the rather dense section of Galatians 5, Paul insists that the freedom given to the Jesus followers in Galatia by means of the Spirit is not for the purpose of self-indulgence; rather their freedom is redefined as it is reinvigorated by the life-giving Spirit: they have been set free in order to love their neighbors (5:13-14). Having made this point, Paul concludes his letter with the encapsulating charge to “bear one another’s burdens” (6:2), to share their material goods (6:6), and to not grow weary in doing good (6:9).

The development of this theme of generosity to the poor in Paul’s letter to the Galatians is even more substantial when we consider the recent work of New Testament scholar Bruce Longenecker. He has convincingly demonstrated that the phrase “remember the poor” in Galatians 2:10 is not an appeal for Gentile followers to send money to struggling Jesus followers in Jerusalem

(as it has been understood for many generations of biblical scholarship); instead it is an admonishment for Gentile followers of Jesus to exhibit the same kind of generosity within their own indigenous Gentile communities that has been characteristic among the first (Jewish) followers of Jesus.⁹ If Longenecker is correct, then caring for the poor was to be a defining mark of the Jesus communities, wherever they were found, even in Gentile urban centers where generosity towards the poor was virtually non-existent. The context (Galatians 1:6-2:21) in which this charge to “remember the poor” is issued is equally illuminating for our purposes: Paul indicates that caring for the poor is behavior that is consistent with being faithful to the pattern of life that is generated from the truth of the gospel.

In light of the above discussion, it is important to underscore that for Paul “doing good” is not merely an appeal to generic acts of morality, but rather is a call to live generously, using one’s material resources to share with others in need. It is equally important to see that Paul has taken the well-known term “do/work the good,” which within its Greco-Roman cultural setting meant something akin to “use your material goods to publically benefit others who can in turn benefit you with honor,” and has reinterpreted the phrase by reorienting “the good” through the prism of Jesus’ self-giving life. Thus, whereas in the Greco-Roman urban centers “doing good works” was self-promoting and ensured that resources continued to circulate almost exclusively among those who had no need, within the Pauline communities it took on a different meaning—namely, sharing your resources with those who can give you nothing (that is, honor or any other kind of reciprocity) in return: “Therefore, then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of *all*” (6:10, italics mine).

We see this term used in the same manner in the letter to Titus. There Paul concludes with the admonishment to “let people learn to devote themselves to *good works* in order to meet urgent needs” (Titus 3:14). Here it is clear that good works are those acts that are performed in order to provide material resources for those in want; it is also clear that generosity is expected of one who claims to be a follower of Jesus, and should be a characteristic pattern of life within the community of believers.

In Greco-Roman cities “doing good works” was self-promoting and ensured that resources circulated almost exclusively among those who had no need. In Paul’s churches it had a different meaning—namely, sharing your resources with those who can give you nothing.

GENEROSITY AND ASSOCIATING WITH THE “LOWLY”

As we look at other ways in which Paul instructs his readers to orient their communal life around self-giving love and generosity, we learn that charitable giving is not enough to accomplish Paul’s notion of generosity. Instead, Paul raises the bar. For example, in 1 Thessalonians 5:12-14, he exhorts the community of Jesus followers to admonish the idle and to help the “weak,” a word that can indicate those in economically vulnerable positions.¹⁰ And in 1 Corinthians 1:26-28, Paul appropriates the term “weak” to describe that portion of the church who were non-elites, which as we have already seen, implicates those approximately eighty percent who were economically vulnerable. It is significant to note that these brief references in 1 Thessalonians 5 and 1 Corinthians 1 indicate that the poor and vulnerable already had a place within the community of Jesus followers; they were not excluded from fellowship. We get a similar picture from Paul’s letter to the Romans, where he admonishes Jesus followers to “contribute to the needs of the saints” in light of the mercies that God has shown to them (12:13). It is noteworthy that Paul takes generosity one step further, however, by exhorting Christian Romans to abandon their quest for self-promoting honor by associating with the “lowly,” that is with those who will not enhance their social status (12:16). For Paul, it is not enough to give generously; to extend the “genuine love” that is experienced in Jesus Christ, followers must also extend hospitality to those who can provide no form of reciprocity (12:9; see also Romans 15:7).

Embedded in his picture of what it looks like to “lead a life worthy of the calling” to which followers of Jesus have been called (Ephesians 4:1),¹¹ Paul instructs those who have been accustomed to stealing to instead work honestly with their own hands. For our purposes, it is important to note his basis for such an exhortation: hard, honest work is required “so that you will have something to share with the needy” (Ephesians 4:28). This short reference assumes first, that marginalized people (such as thieves) are part of the assembly, and second, that there are some within their midst who are needy. Once again Paul reveals that belonging to the community of Jesus followers, a community that has renounced the futile ways of the Gentiles (4:17), implies that one is actively participating in generosity towards those who are lacking material resources, and creating a space for those people in the gathering – because this new corporate body has been created in the likeness of God (4:24).

Our discussion of Paul’s expectations regarding generosity and the way that he links those expectations with the gospel helps us better understand why he was so agitated by certain Corinthian followers of Jesus because of the manner in which they practiced the Lord’s Supper (1 Corinthians 11:17-34). For Paul, to participate in the Lord’s Supper (which at its core is a celebration of Jesus giving of himself for others; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26) while failing to notice that some within the gathering were being neglected much

needed food and drink is to do so in an “unworthy manner” (11:27). In fact, he says that eating the Lord’s Supper in such a manner is to not participate in the meal at all (11:20). In response, Paul demands that those who had the luxury of arriving early to the Lord’s Supper (that is, the wealthier members who did not have to work) should wait for the others (that is, the day laborers and others who lived at a subsistence level) so that together they could truly embody what the meal is all about. To do otherwise is to fail to truly “remember” the Lord’s Supper and to provoke God’s judgment (11:30). To leave out the poor is to show contempt for the church of God and to humiliate those who have nothing (11:22). It is in this sense that Paul charges the Corinthians to “discern the body” – to look around and notice that their practice of the Lord’s Supper was creating divisions in the church along economic lines (11:29), something that was entirely antithetical to what this new community of Jesus followers was called to be.

PARTICIPATING IN THE GENEROSITY OF GOD

Paul’s collection for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem (Romans 15:26) is yet another window into the expectations he had for communities that claimed Jesus as their Lord. Gathering data from Romans 15:26-27, 1 Corinthians 16:1-4, and 2 Corinthians 8-9, we learn that Paul dedicated about five years of his ministry to collect money from Gentile Jesus-followers in order to alleviate suffering due to extreme financial hardship in Jerusalem among some of the Jewish followers of Jesus.¹¹ Much

could be said about this collection, but for our purposes I wish to underscore two foundational (and intricately related) motivations for generosity that we discover as we attend to Paul’s collection efforts. First, we see that Paul considers generosity (that is, the sharing of their goods with the saints in Jerusalem) to be an implication and obligation of the gospel: “you glorify God by

your *obedience* to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them” (2 Corinthians 9:13). As we have seen elsewhere, here according to Paul, the message of the gospel entails generosity towards those who cannot give in return. Second, generosity is rooted in and enabled by the transforming generosity of Jesus Christ: “you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he

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became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9). It is on this basis that Paul exhorts the Corinthians to participate in the collection for the saints in Jerusalem. Paul regards generosity towards the Jewish followers of Jesus in Jerusalem as proof that Gentile followers of Jesus have indeed been transformed by the Spirit of the self-giving Jesus Christ, that they have indeed become participants in the spiritual blessings of Israel's one true God (Romans 15:26-27 and 8:1-17). As we have already seen, the Greco-Roman world was never known for its concern for the poor, nor was it ever characterized by generosity that did not entail reciprocity. The collection was a tangible indication that the God of Israel had transformed these Gentiles into the likeness of God's generous, self-giving image.

We conclude our survey of Paul's expectations for generosity by looking at a letter that is often left out of the discussion, his epistle to the Philippians. It is not always acknowledged that at its core the message of Philippians is a charge to continue in partnership with Paul and his gospel ministry (1:3-7), even if such a partnership might result in social alienation and other forms of suffering (1:12-30). For Paul, the partnership to which he calls the Philippians clearly involves financial giving: towards the end of the letter he commends the Philippians for their faithful giving to his ministry (4:15-16). And in the beginning of the letter he describes their partnership as the "good work" that God began among them – the good work of partnering with Paul and his mission (1:6). It is within this wider concern that Paul urges the Philippians to look not at their own interests, but rather the interests of others (2:4). And, as he has done in other letters, he anchors this appeal for generosity to the pattern of Jesus' life, "who did not use his unique and privileged status as something to exploit for his own benefit, but instead emptied himself in humiliating obedience that resulted in death" (2:6-8, my paraphrase). Paul's primary exhortation to the Philippians is that they would participate in that same kind of selflessness and generosity (2:1-4). And while Jesus is put forth as the paradigm for generosity, Paul also shows how he (1:12-18), Timothy (2:19-24), and Epaphroditus (2:25-30), each in his own way, have actively participated in Jesus' self-sacrificing, "seeking-the-interest-of-others" generosity for the sake of the partnership in the gospel.

CONCLUSION

What does Paul have to contribute to our understanding of generosity? It turns out that his portion is quite substantial! Having sorted through the various letters that Paul wrote to disparate communities within the Mediterranean world of the first century, we see that Paul was quite consistent with other voices in Scripture in affirming, through his instruction and the patterns of life established in his churches, that God's people have been delivered *from* sin and this present age characterized by selfishness and greed *for* the sake of the life of the world; that to belong to God and his people entails being actively engaged in seeking the welfare of the poor, the vulnerable, and the marginalized of society.

While his contribution is consistent with other voices in Scripture, Paul also has some poignant points to add to the discussion. For example, he reminds us that genuine love and generosity require us not only to give to those in need, but also to make a place for them in our gatherings. He also reminds us that generosity is enabled as we share in the life of God – that it is generated by the transforming grace of God manifested in the self-emptying life of Jesus Christ and made accessible through the life-giving Spirit. And finally, we see that those who seek to be faithful followers of Jesus are not only called to give cognitive assent to certain propositions about what God has accomplished in and through Jesus Christ, but also required by the gospel to pattern their lives, personal and communal, in such a way that they bear witness to God's own hospitality and generosity.

NOTES

1 See, for example, the specific laws regarding just treatment of the poor, the vulnerable, and the resident aliens (Exodus 22:16-23:9), the directions regarding the Sabbath Year and the Jubilee Year (Leviticus 25), and the summary of God's law (Deuteronomy 10:12-22). For a comprehensive study on wealth and poverty in the Pentateuch, see David L. Baker, *Tight Fists or Open Hands? Wealth and Poverty in Old Testament Law* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2009).

2 Consider Isaiah's contrast between the faithlessness of Jerusalem (Isaiah 1:21-23) and God's expectations for the city (Isaiah 42:6-9; 61:1-11), Amos's critique of the northern kingdom of Israel (Amos 2:6-11; 8:4-14) and promise of its divine restoration to justice (Amos 9:11-15), Micah's denunciation of Judah (Micah 2:1-13; cf. 6:8), and Malachi's critique of the restored kingdom (Malachi 1:1-3:15).

3 For several examples from this literature, see Craig L. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Possessions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999).

4 Several of the thirteen letters attributed to Paul are contested by some biblical scholars (e.g., Ephesians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, and Titus). For the sake of convenience, I will refer to Paul as the author for all the letters attributed to him in the New Testament. My arguments, however, do not depend upon Pauline authorship, and in some cases the point I am making becomes even stronger if the letters were written by someone who wished to carry on the foundational teachings of Paul after his death.

5 For a recent discussion on Paul's alleged disregard for the poor, see Bruce W. Longenecker, *Remember the Poor: Paul, Poverty and the Greco-Roman World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2010), 1-16.

6 For a detailed analysis of the economic makeup of urban centers in the first-century Greco-Roman world, see Longenecker, *Remember the Poor*, 36-59.

7 Honorary inscriptions were usually stone monuments erected in prominent public spaces by wealthy patrons in order to make known their charitable acts for the people of the city.

8 In the social world of the first century, what we would call "right" and "wrong" was principally determined by whether a particular act was judged honorable by the group one esteemed or desired to join. (In this regard, it was similar to middle school social dynamics today.) In the Greco-Roman urban centers, honor was competitively sought as a commodity with limited availability.

9 See Longenecker's comprehensive development of the claim in *Remember the Poor*, 157-219.

10 Similarly, in Acts 20:35 the “weak” are those who are in need of economic support.

11 The dating of Paul’s letters and the activities of his three “missionary journeys” is complicated and contested. I am in basic agreement with Longenecker, *Remember the Poor*, 338-344.



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