

## **He Became, That We Might Become** *Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians*

### **The Lord Hears the Cry of the Poor, Part 4: Jesus, Generosity, and Justice** *2 Corinthians 8:9*

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#### **Introduction: Generosity at Neighborhood Church of Dorchester**

In the past year, I've been really struck by Neighborhood Church's generosity. In August 2021, we had a service to honor Haiti and the people of Haiti despite the earthquake and the assassination of their president. And I know many of us gave money through the non-profit organization that our sister Edyne Lalanne and her mom had set up. Another act of generosity was Maria bringing people food when they were sick with COVID. Another was Seona offering to run errands for people. Another was Berto helping me repair my house; I know he's done work for other people, and Berto's attention to detail is amazing; that's generosity of time and energy. I think of Pam connecting to our service on Facebook Live, being generous with her attention.

#### **Relevance**

The title of this series is, *The Lord Hears the Cry of the Poor*. So who are the poor? Scripture says there are many different people in that category. We started on Labor Day, and we looked at the Cry of Poor Workers, because the poor are always made to work for low wages in bad conditions. So we looked at an Old Testament passage, Isaiah 58 – 59, to see how God responded to that. When God hears the cry of the poor, part of God's response was to rebuke and correct His people. Part of His response was to promise to intervene even more deeply in human affairs, as the Redeemer.

In week two, we looked at the Cry of the Sick, because the poor are always more sick than others. We stayed in Isaiah 58 – 59 to see how God cared for those whose health was suffering from injustice. Once again, God's response was twofold: rebuke and correct in the immediate situation, and then promise to intervene more deeply as the Redeemer.

In week three, we looked at the Cry of our Future Children and Grandchildren. We asked, "What can we do to leave the planet more like the garden that God intended?" And we looked at God's words in Isaiah to see how God cared for creation. When the Redeemer comes, and we believe Jesus was that redeemer, the Redeemer would renew the garden of Eden in this world.

So if Jesus is the Redeemer and Jesus is God's response to the cry of the poor, how? And what does Jesus call us to do now?

#### **Context**

I'm going to look at a New Testament passage now: 2 Corinthians 8. This letter is written by the apostle Paul, one of the earliest of Jewish Christian leaders, to the Christian community at Corinth. In this section, Paul is saying to the Corinthians that he's grateful for their financial generosity. They had pledged to contribute to a famine relief fund for the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem and Judea. Paul was saying, "Now is a good time to give. Can you give what you pledged?" And as he reminds them, he encourages them by pointing to Jesus.

#### **He Became Poor**

So I'm going to focus on this one verse, verse 9:

9 For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich.

Let me read that again. Now, why is this verse not preached more? If you just read that sentence by itself, you might wonder, "Am I supposed to be poor?" Especially if you tend to be hard on yourself, and a perfectionist. Like, if I'm supposed to be like Jesus, then I need to become poor to help others become rich, right? Oh man, how am I supposed to do that? Where do I go to give my money? Or, if you read that sentence by itself, you might wonder,

“Am I supposed to be rich?” Especially if you come from what is called a “prosperity theology” church where you name it and claim it, God is going to give you that raise, that winning lottery ticket. If I’m supposed to be rich, how do I do that? Where do I go to collect my money?

But this is referring not just to the things we value. Paul is referring to everything God values. And what does God value? Three things: His own life, the lives of others, and the life of creation. What does it mean to be rich in those things?

### **Rich in God’s Own Life**

Let’s look at the first: God’s own life. Sharing of wealth and food and housing is a reflection of sharing in the life of God, because God is gracious, and generous, and just. In this passage, Paul says, God gave grace to the churches of Macedonia, the neighbors of the Corinthians, in verse 1. How did he know that? Because in verses 6 and 7, the churches are doing the gracious work of raising funds for famine relief victims in another part of the world. And in verse 9, that grace is an expression of the grace of Jesus. So first and foremost, Jesus was rich and is rich in God’s own life.

The stories of Jesus that especially stand out to me are the times when Jesus touched a man with leprosy (Lk.5:12 – 16). Or when he touched a dead boy’s coffin (Lk.7:11 – 17) or a dead girl’s body (Lk.8:54 – 56). Basically, anytime Jesus encountered people who were dead, or things connected to death, he made a point to touch them. And that’s because he was sharing God’s own life with them. So he was reversing death. Jesus would enter death itself and come out in resurrection. So everything Jesus did to bring life to others outside of himself was like the appetizers for what he did in his own body to his own humanity, so he could now touch us with God’s life.

It’s like the times that Jesus touched places in me that were dying because I was resisting God. One time I was wallowing in self-pity because I had just moved here to Boston and I didn’t know who my friends were. A part of my heart was developing resentment. And then, I felt like an invisible warm hand was on my chest. I was in worship. I was trying to worship Jesus. And he gave me God’s life in a place in me that felt dead.

In Jesus, and in following Jesus, we are rich in the life of God. The God who is subtle and quiet, who works with human partnership because He loves us. We can be rich in that life.

### **Rich in the Lives of Others**

Second, Jesus makes us rich in the lives of others. Jesus is restoring God’s vision of the whole human race loving one another. In this passage, Jesus had united the Greek Christians in Corinth with the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem and Judea, even though they had never physically met before. So Jesus made them rich by sharing in the lives of others. And it’s not because the financial relief fund was so big. I’m sure it was helpful, but I don’t get the sense from the New Testament that it was enormous. In fact, the Christians in Macedonia, which was to the north of Corinth, gave to this fund. And they were already in poverty (2 Cor.8:2). So their gift must have been small. But you know what? You are rich in the lives of others when people who are struggling themselves share what they have because they care about you.

I know that Jeff Bezos and Mark Zuckerberg could give billions of dollars to charity. But Jesus in Luke 21:1 – 4 noticed a poor Jewish widow who put her last two copper coins into an offering plate. And he said that is devotion. That is love for God. Jesus sees right into our hearts. Here in 2 Corinthians 8:12, Paul applies what he has learned from Jesus: “For if the willingness is present, it is acceptable according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have.”

And when these communities were willing to be in relationship with each other, yes there were funds that went in a certain direction this time. But there was love and appreciation that went in many directions. And Paul says in verse 14 that in the future, funds might flow in the future in a different direction, wherever the need was. “At this present time your abundance will serve as assistance for their need, so that their abundance also may serve as assistance for your need, so that there may be equality” (2 Cor.8:14).

Let’s be generous with each other in many ways. I’m going to step back from money per se to talk about relationships in general. It’s interesting to me that when we have difficulties with friends and family, we often resort to the language of money. “What am I getting out of this? Is it worth my time? This is costing me.” There is a

premarital counseling workbook that asks the couple, “How do you put credit in the account of your relationship? Like put money in the bank? How do you withdraw funds from your relationship?” I understand that language. I feel it, too. But that’s not the only way of handling our relationships, especially when Jesus is involved. That way of thinking has two problems. First, your perception might be off. Second, if Jesus is in your life, he came to make you rich in relationship, and to make other people rich in relationship, too. So Jesus can fill you and me, so that you have more to give. Now Jesus wants you to rest also. Boundaries are important, too. If there are sin issues involved, then that needs to be addressed differently. But we need to respond to Jesus, and not just respond to people who may feel costly to us. Here’s an illustration.

Illus: This past two weeks, my daughter got into some friendship problems with her two groups of friends. I don’t know what all the issues were. But in the morning, when we went to school, she would be sad and somber. When I picked her up, she was quiet. Now I’ve had concerns that she gravitates to other loud, extroverted children. So a few days ago, I asked her, “Can I give you a little challenge to do today? Who is someone in class that you don’t know that well?” Translate: Someone you feel like you don’t get something back from. She named one person. I said, “My challenge is to find out something about this person that you didn’t know before.”

So here’s a challenge for us in this body. There may be someone in your life who feels like the Jewish widow, who doesn’t have a lot to give to you. Put maybe that person is trying to give you her two copper coins, to you and to God. Now, maybe you FEEL like this other person doesn’t have much to offer you. But to Jesus, that person might be like the Jewish widow, who offers her two copper coins. She was rich in God’s life. That’s what I mean by saying our perceptions are often off. We need to have the strength to perceive and receive their gifts. That’s doesn’t mean that your experience doesn’t matter; it does. But we need to also experience what Jesus experiences in that person. Maybe there is a way for us to be rich in relationship if we only saw with his eyes.

### **Rich in the Creation**

Finally, third, Jesus makes us rich in this creation. Not individually, but as part of the church. I’ve really wrestled with this passage, and I feel like I’m starting to understand it. Jesus said, “The meek will inherit the land,” meaning a renewed planet earth. Paul said the people of God would inherit the world (Romans 4:13). Out of that big picture vision, tied to relationships among the followers of Jesus, yes Jesus makes us rich in this creation, both now and in eternity future.

In v.13 – 14, Paul looks at the global church – these communities that have never met face to face – and says there should be equality. “For this is not for the ease of others and for your affliction, but by way of equality— at this present time your abundance being a supply for their need, so that their abundance also may become a supply for your need, that there may be equality.” And then in v.15, which I’ll look at next week, Paul quotes from the story of God raining down manna on Israel when they were in the wilderness. In that story, each household got enough for every day. They couldn’t collect more and couldn’t collect less. It’s a fascinating story to throw in there. Equality aims at the baseline of trusting God together for our daily bread, and builds from there.

Illus: So in 2014, when I was in Haiti on a learning and service trip, my group met with Haitian church leaders and seminary students. We heard from them. They said after the earthquake of 2010, they appreciated water bottles and supplies from Americans. But they said more. They also pointed out that the U.S. dumps rice grown in the U.S. into Haiti, which drives Haitian farmers out of business, which makes them move to Port-au-Prince looking for work, which leads to overcrowding, which leads to houses not built well, which leads to houses falling down on people in earthquakes. When relief work interferes with development work, it increases poverty and instability. That’s why I’ve written to Congress for us to stop doing that, why I try to continue to learn.

So that’s what it means to be rich in relationship in the church and then to be rich in this creation. It’s not as simple as giving people money, although that is certainly part of it. The apostle Paul was collecting donations for a famine relief fund. But development work that is economically sustainable and ecologically sustainable is part of the picture. Many Christians in other parts of the world say that the U.S. needs to change course in order to stop affecting them negatively.

### **Jesus Again**

So let me come back to verse 9. If this is challenging to us – and it certainly is to me – then let’s remember Jesus.

9 For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich.

We'll look next week at what that was that like for him. When he was born, his parents laid him in a borrowed manger. And when he died, they laid him in a borrowed tomb. In between, throughout his life, he was a refugee and an immigrant. He barely survived a genocidal massacre. His country was occupied by invaders, constantly sucked dry. His earthly family was certainly not wealthy. And whatever family resources he did inherit, he left behind when he became a wandering rabbi. In the Gospel of John, John reports that "all his disciples left him and went to their own homes, but Jesus went out to the Mount of Olives." In other words, he spent part of his life being homeless outdoors. He said he had no place to rest his head. He depended on others for clothes and food. When he performed a certain miracle, he had to borrow a coin.

But Jesus made us rich in the life of God, rich in relationship with others especially in the church which is God's renewed humanity, and rich in the creation as part of God's people around the world.