

“Abundance or Scarcity?”

2 Corinthians 8:7-15

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So I finally had a sermon prepared and all set to go as of last night at around 9:30. We were on our way home from a family reunion in southwestern Kentucky as I was finishing up my sermon. I had hoped to be finished with the sermon before we left for the reunion on Wednesday night, but there was too much to do in the three short days after coming home from two weeks away due to Annual Conference and the youth mission trip. So there I was, working on my sermon on the 7-hour drive home. Along the way, I had made the decision to cut a significant section of my sermon out, because it just wasn't fitting into what I wanted to say. That's probably what enabled me to finish it just as I looked up and saw the sign that says I-270 was 4 miles away.

We went to bed almost as soon as we got home. I thought I was really tired from the trip, but I just couldn't fall asleep. One of the contributing factors was that we had CNN on as we were getting ready for bed, and there was a story on about a family who was suffering because of the economic downturn. The tagline on the TV screen said “Families hit hard.” The reporter was interviewing a family who was heavily invested in stocks last year, the husband worked for AIG and the wife worked for Bear Stearns. They had lost a lot of money. Here's two of the main impacts of the recession for this couple as reported on CNN: they had to fire their personal trainer and exercise on their own, and they could no longer afford to complete the project of digging a lake on their property, so there was a lingering open space where several trees had been cut down, but no lake dug as of yet – the project was currently on hold.

Something about that story collided in my mind with the fact that the significant portion that I cut out of my sermon talked about our feelings of abundance or scarcity where money is concerned. I had cut out that section because money is one of the two least favorite things people want their preacher to talk about. (The other is sin.) But I found myself tossing and turning, unable to get to sleep, wondering if I should bag the sermon I had written and write the sermon I felt God calling me to preach. So, at 11:30 last night, I gave up on sleep, grabbed that section of sermon that I had cut out, and used it as a starting point for this sermon.

I should probably admit that one thing going through my mind was that the sermon I had written would work really well in a couple of weeks when I'm up to preach again. I think it was Cathy that I was talking to this week in the office as I was trying to come up with sermon titles for my sermon on the last Sunday in July. I told her that the text for that week really spoke to the issue of scarcity and abundance, but that I was preaching on that topic this week. She suggested that I use the title “Abundance or Scarcity II” but I picked another title to be

published in our Maple Leaf newsletter. I think now, however, you may just get “Abundance or Scarcity II” in a couple of weeks. And that’s a good thing! So don’t check the sermon calendar and make plans for a vacation that weekend in July. There really are two different and important paths to take on this topic.

So all of this leads me to today’s text and today’s sermon. The section of 2 Corinthians we heard this morning is specifically about money and giving, and I don’t think we should avoid that aspect of it.

This morning’s text was originally part of a stewardship campaign. Paul was writing to the people of Corinth to encourage them to give to the needs of the church in Jerusalem.¹ Despite their own poverty, the Macedonian churches had generously funded the church in Corinth. So the apostle Paul was asking the Corinthian church to return the favor and help fund the church in Jerusalem.

Yes, this text is about giving. But at a deeper level it’s about perspective. Does the Corinthian church get it? Do the Corinthian Christians remember where they came from and where they are now? It’s a test, Paul says, to see if their love is genuine. Do they have a healthy perspective of how much they actually have compared to others? Are they operating out of a mindset of scarcity or do they recognize their abundance?

As far as Paul saw it, Corinth needed to remember their roots and give. Their congregation was blessed by those who gave to help them in their hour of need. When the churches in Macedonia had more than Corinth, they bankrolled the Corinthian church. Now Jerusalem was in greater need than Corinth and it was time to share the wealth.

Corinth’s abundance was not abundance as most would define it, but Paul was appealing to a financial comparison. Regardless of what they had, it was at least more than the Jerusalem church had. For Paul, those who have more than others should share with those who have less. Period. In our text this morning, Paul calls it a “fair balance.” He says, “not that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of fair balance between your present abundance and their need” (vv. 13-14).

If you’re like me, you’ve asked yourself just how rich is “rich” and how needy is “in need”? It seems to me to be a matter of perspective. Is ours a perspective of abundance or a perspective of scarcity. That couple on CNN had a beautiful house, inside and out, they were shown eating off of very nice looking china and drinking from high quality stemware, and they were being

¹ Beginning with this section, much of this sermon was inspired by and taken from “The Apostle Paul Asks for Money” from www.homileticsonline.com.

shown as hard hit by the economy. It seems to me that this couple, and CNN, were operating out of a mindset of scarcity rather than focusing on the abundance they have. Have we as a culture missed the possibility that God has already put us in a position of provision? In other words, do we need to have our hands out or our wallets out? Are we called to receive or to give?

Not many of us feel rich, especially in these economic times. But let's play Paul's money comparison game, first at home and then abroad. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the median household income for 2007 was just over \$50,000 total for the average household of 2.54 people. So if Paul were applying his "fair balance" approach today, he might say all homes which live on less than \$50,000 per year put your hands out, and all those that see over \$50,000 per year put your wallets out.

But with the information age, the whole world has become our Jerusalem in a sense. We know the plight of the poorest of the poor. One estimate of global household incomes puts the median at \$10,000, when rounded up. Perhaps all households which live on less than \$10,000 per year should put their hands out, and those that live on more than \$10,000 per year should put their wallets out.

Now I'm not sure this was exactly what Paul meant by "fair balance," but the point, however, is more to jar our perspective a bit. Should we be people with our hands out or our wallets out, and compared with whom? Are we Corinth or Jerusalem? If given only two options, are we rich or poor?

When a person shakes a rattle in front of a baby, the child may coo with delight. But if you tuck that rattle behind your back, the baby literally thinks it disappeared forever. Developmentally, babies do not yet grasp object permanence — the idea that something out of sight still exists. That's why when mom and dad leave the room, a screaming baby may feel as though they are gone forever.

Most people lack a similar sense of object permanence with regard to money. Our comfort, self-justification and plain old-fashioned greed cause most of us to forget how dramatically rich we may be. We compare ourselves only to the Joneses who have more than we do instead of the Joneses who have less. We treat the needs of others as out of sight out of mind as we focus on our own needs and our own situation.

This is why I find it so important to participate in programs like Compassion International that my wife Sandi is promoting this week. For years, Sandi and I had heard about the ministry of Compassion International at youth ministry events we attended. The youth group we volunteered for at our home church had sponsored a child, and the youth group at my last church decided to sponsor a child while I was serving there. So I knew about their ministry, and

I had always thought about maybe sponsoring a child, but it never felt like the right time. After several years of trying to have children of our own, it dawned on me that I was being pretty hypocritical when I was praying that God would bless us with children and I was unwilling to make a commitment of just \$40 per month to support a child in poverty. So, while Sandi and I were at a youth ministry training conference in the fall of 2005, we decided to sponsor a young man named Eliphaz John from Tanzania, who was 14 years old at the time.

From that time on, we have built a wonderful relationship with Eliphaz, writing letters back and forth. He draws us a picture with each letter, we get status updates on his schooling, I keep a picture of him in my wallet, and his picture hangs on our fridge. Here is all the correspondence we've had throughout the years. I'd like to read you just one of his letters.

Dear Jeff and Sandi Allen,

Dear my friends. I greet you in the name of our savior Jesus Christ. I thank God that I have finished this year safely and we are doing well. I am proceeding well with my studies and God is good that He has enabled me to join form 3. I would like you to pray for me so that I may pass my examinations because sometimes the test used to be very tough. I thank you Jeff and Sandi for your picture together with your beautiful children Luke and Robert. I was very happy to see you. God bless you and thank you for your love and care to me. I would like to give you a Bible verse from Isaiah 9:6 "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." I am very grateful to have a picture of Robert and Luke. I will continue to pray for you and your family. God bless you. Goodbye. – Eliphaz John

My relationship with Eliphaz continues to remind me of the abundance of God, and the abundance I have in my own life. I really don't like to highlight things that I do as if to say, "look how great I am" – especially in sermons. But I felt it was important to share with you a personal testimony of how transformative it can be to be in intentional relationship with someone who is in poverty, and to experience the blessing it is to share one's abundance with another.

This is not an advertisement for Compassion International specifically. It is a wonderful program, and I encourage you to participate if it is right for you and your family and if you feel God calling you to do so. You can get more information from Sandi after the service. There are many other ways to build relationships with people in poverty and to give economically to assist those in poverty. So I guess the question this morning is, "are you doing something?"

My fear is that this economic downturn has encouraged our society to become even more self-centered, and self-centeredness is not a part of the kingdom of God. The call to Christian discipleship this morning is to understand our abundance and to live in such a way that we are

in relationship with those who experience true scarcity. The call to Christian discipleship this morning is to allow Paul's words to jar our perspectives a bit to truly understand whether we are living in a mindset of scarcity or whether we are experiencing God's abundance. The call to Christian discipleship is to honestly evaluate whether our family budgets are representative of our faith. When we pray that the kingdom of God might come on earth as it is in heaven, are we willing to open our pocketbooks to help create that "fair balance" that Paul talks about, or do we have a mindset of scarcity that would keep us from being generous?