

Giving and Serving

The needs of the world are overwhelming. When faced with a widespread disaster, such as the latest hurricane on the Gulf of Mexico coastal areas, we often think it more than we can help. Need and tragedy are not resolved by one person or organization but by the compassion and contributions of many.



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We have been studying the overwhelming needs of the Jerusalem congregation and Paul's mission to resolve that crisis and remind all those fledgling congregations that together they can help people and honor God with their gifts. Although Corinth was wealthy, Paul did not expect them alone to resolve the needs of that distant church. In fact, Paul reminds them that "Macedonia and Achaia have been happy to make a contribution for the poor among God's people in Jerusalem" (v. 26).

Humankind is divided by multiple barriers of language, cultural customs, racial distinctives and geography, but we are witnessing in the earliest days of the church the power of God's grace to overcome any barrier. Paul was driven by a desire to make Christ known in all the world, but his passion was not just to record an impressive number of baptisms. He longed to see the truth and passion of God's love changing lives for the better and influencing society by the spiritual/moral values of God's kingdom. A gospel that majors solely on saving people from hell at the end of life is incomplete. We are "saved" to live in the present, to model the grace of Christ every day as a "new creation."

Although the mission to alleviate suffering in the Jerusalem church is reaching completion, Paul is already dreaming of taking the gospel to Spain, the westernmost part of Europe. Spain was already known

as a center of culture and learning, and Paul saw it as a key outpost for spreading the Good News further into northern Europe. In my overseas traveling I have witnessed the influence and success of missions where we not only preached, but also offered a clear picture that the Christian faith is concerned about healing broken societies and meeting the everyday needs of people.

Paul reinforces his appeal for generosity and the relationship among all believers by asking for their prayers as he sets his sights on Rome and beyond. "Brothers and sisters, I urge you, through our Lord Jesus Christ and through the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggles in your prayers to God for me" (v. 31). Paul is carrying their offering to Jerusalem, where he will face very real threats from the Jewish authorities who had originally commissioned Paul to destroy the "Jesus movement" (Acts 7:54-8:3). Paul would visit Rome on his way to Spain, but that journey would not be as he planned; we have no record that he ever reached Spain. When Paul arrived in Jerusalem, a group of forty Jewish men pledged to kill Paul (Acts 23:12-13), he was arrested as a threat to Roman peace and he faced court hearings before the Roman governors Felix and Festus as well as the Jewish king Agrippa II. He went to Rome as a prisoner because, as a Roman citizen, he could appeal to the highest court of Caesar.

Paul never ceased being a Jew, but he became a completed Jew when he committed his life to Jesus, the promised Messiah. He recognized all the promises of God in Jesus the Christ. His thorough education in the history and holy books of Judaism equipped Paul to be a powerful theologian and leader of churches across the empire. It was this Paul who urged Gentile churches to love their brothers and sisters of Jewish heritage and the

Formations

September 24, 2017

Scripture: Romans 15:25-33

Jerusalem believers to recognize that Gentiles could also become God's children. This expression of compassion across powerful barriers reminds us that God can truly change our thinking and living. Faith in Christ is not commitment to ideas or traditions, but the formation of a relationship with God in Christ that changes everything.

You know what it means to pay membership dues to an organization, to financially support a cause or program. But Paul is showing us a generosity of spirit, a compassion based on the gift of Christ, that exceeds organizational or societal priorities. Paul demonstrates how Christ can change a human heart as he works diligently to raise this special offering and as he surrenders his life to God every day.

We are called to be like Christ who gave himself for us, like the Corinthians and other early churches who gave for those who suffered, and like Paul who gave his life away to tell others about Jesus. Giving and serving are inseparable ideas in the Christian faith. We give to support ministry through a local congregation, to finance missions around the world and to show God's love to people – whether they believe or not. We give because God has given us so much. Whether it is the Gulf Coast, a shelter in the poorest area of our city, a family devastated by financial collapse or a child in need of surgery, we are moved by Jesus, who gave himself on a cross for us all. When you give in the spirit of Christ something happens within you. You become a little bit more the beautiful creation God intended you to be. Celebrate the grace of God by serving and giving.

Retired after 46 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.