

Remember the Poor

How the Earliest Christians Cared for the Needy

*A Tool for Making the Case
for Mercy in Your Congregation*

An in-depth study with questions for group use

by Matthew C. Harrison



Published by Concordia Publishing House
3558 S. Jefferson Ave., St. Louis, MO 63118-3968
1-800-325-3040 • www.cph.org

Copyright © 2018 The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

No part of this material may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of Concordia Publishing House.

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the ESV Bible® (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

The quotation from Luther's Works in this publication is from the American Edition: vol. 36 © 1959 by Augsburg Fortress. Used by permission of the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Harrison, Matthew C., author.

Title: Remember the poor : How the earliest Christians cared for the needy; a tool for making the case for mercy in your congregation / by Matthew C. Harrison.

Description: Saint Louis : Concordia Publishing House, 2018. | Includes bibliographical references and index. |

Identifiers: LCCN 2017058269 (print) | LCCN 2018004026 (ebook) | ISBN 9780758661067 | ISBN 9780758661029 (alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Bible. New Testament--Criticism, interpretation, etc. | Church fund raising--Biblical teaching. | Mercy--Biblical teaching.

Classification: LCC BS2545.C554 (ebook) | LCC BS2545.C554 H37 2018 (print) | DDC 225.6/7--dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2017058269>

Manufactured in the United States of America

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 27 26 25 24 23 22 21 20 19 18

Contents

Preface.	iv
Foreword.	v
Map of Paul's Missionary Journeys	vii
Paul's Collection for Jerusalem	1
Introduction	2
The Collection Texts	5
When?	12
Jewish Cultural Context at the Time of the Collection	23
Who?	26
What?	45
So What?	62
Leader Guide	65

Preface

One of the constant callings and simultaneous challenges for the church is to embody Christ's presence in concrete acts of charity and mercy. As the faithful hear the living voice of Jesus through His apostles and prophets, and as they experience His presence at the font and the altar, they are to live out this gracious reality of God's mercy and compassion in Christ. Matthew C. Harrison's study of Paul's collection for Jerusalem displays how Paul's theology was embodied in this apostolic effort. The examination of scriptural texts is scholarly and thorough. At the same time, the author goes beyond exegetical research that remains abstract. Rather, Harrison persuasively recommends that Paul's practice is the appropriate paradigm for churchly care and compassion for the neighbor in the twenty-first century. Here is a refreshing, scriptural antidote to a sterile and abstract orthodoxy on the one hand, and liberalism's empty effort to do good on the other hand. Here, Christ and His gifts permeate the actions as well as the thought of the church. Readers will benefit from this insightful exposition of a frequently neglected aspect of Paul's apostolic mission.

May the church hear afresh Paul's invitation: "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1).

Dean O. Wenthe

SEPTEMBER 2007

Foreword

In 2007, I was able to find a little time to work on the topic of St. Paul's great collection for Jerusalem. There is so very much packed into this issue in the New Testament, and as I hope the reader will see, so much of the vital heartbeat of Paul's theology resonates for him in this issue, which one scholar has called Paul's "obsession." The issues of grace, fellowship, mercy, mission, and others all coincide at the point of the collection. Even more, tracing the history of the collection through the New Testament documents gives enlightenment on the whole sociocultural reality faced by the New Testament church.

You will see that for St. Paul, demonstrating mercy as a corporate churchly act was serious business that took up much of his Christian life. It was deeply intertwined with his view of the Gospel and of the church's mission. Finally, it was delivering the gifts to Jerusalem that led to his imprisonment and ultimate martyrdom.

This paper was written for a PhD course at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, for Dr. Jeffrey Oschwald, a delightful, humble expert on the New Testament who added much and forced the answering of numerous questions. This study is but a beginning. It is about the "nuts and bolts" and dates of the collection and its place in the New Testament.

As I am a "church bureaucrat" who finds himself ill at ease with life strictly governed by policy, budgets, bylaws, and generally accepted accounting principles (all a necessity in this fallen world), drinking deep of the New Testament on this issue was a breath of fresh air. But it was also delightful to find that Paul's dealing with the collection was "big business" for the earliest church, and 2 Corinthians (as Betz demonstrates handily in his commentary) shows that Paul was operating in this matter with the clear language and principles of the legal and business world of his

day. There is a practical, left-hand kingdom side to working together as a fellowship of faith, as church.

Knowing something of the great collection is vital for anyone who actually desires to get something real done in the church on behalf of Christ. From fund development to personnel, to government regulations and internal power struggles, St. Paul dealt with it all. And by God's grace, he found a way to assist the needy in all of it. That's comforting and encouraging. Where the mercy of Christ in the Gospel provides the heartbeat, there is a way to get it done. "Let's go" (Mark 1:38).

Matthew C. Harrison

ST. LOUIS, MO, 2008

Map of Paul's Missionary Journeys



Paul's Collection for Jerusalem



INTRODUCTION

The church can learn a great deal from studying Paul's great collection for Jerusalem. While the famous "stewardship" texts of 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 are regularly recited in efforts to raise funds for operations or special projects in the church's life and mission, or in stewardship education materials, they are more rarely referenced in specific relation to the context that elicited them from the apostle. The fundamental context and reason for the chief apostolic teaching on the sharing of one's possessions, and those of the church as a corporate entity (particularly money), is the alleviation of pressing need among fellow Christians. Overlooking the nature of the great collection also brings a neglect of several significant and even central Pauline themes in the New Testament. Numerous significant points of Paul's theology converge at the collection. Second Corinthians 8–9 alone brims with references to *charis* (grace), *koinonia* (participation/fellowship), *diakonia* (service, ministry), *spoudeis* (free, eager desire), *eulogia* (blessing), *ergon agathon* (good works), *eucharistia* (thanksgiving), *leitourgia* (public service), *genemata tes dikaiosunes* (harvest of righteousness), and others. These are the most powerful and freighted theological terms of the New Testament. Paul uses them all (and others) about or related to the collection for the poor. But more than anything else, this collection demonstrates the integration of Paul's pastoral heart, his theology, and his dedication to missions.¹

At first glance, the apparent dearth of references to the collection in the Book of Acts presents somewhat of a conundrum. How important was the collection to St. Paul? How significant was it for his compatriots and, in general, for the churches he helped to found? Why might Luke in Acts limit references to the collection? The answers to these questions

¹ See James Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 707.

will bear directly upon our assessment of the role of the church today in caring for the poor and needy in its midst. Since Acts is the great book of mission in the Early Church, only one or two clearly direct references in the book to the great collection would seem to relegate this aspect of the church's life to the periphery. Yet the evidence paints a different picture.

In Acts 24:17–18, there occurs the only overt and specific reference in the Book of Acts to Paul's great collection for the poor in Jerusalem. Jews caught up in the Zealot movement accosted Paul at the temple in AD 58. The Zealots were Jewish nationalists who worked to overthrow Roman rule and the influence of Greek culture during this time period.² The Jewish establishment accused Paul of false doctrine. Charges were proffered to Governor Felix. Paul stated in his defense: ¹⁷*Now after several years I came to bring alms to my nation and to present offerings.* ¹⁸*While I was doing this, they found me purified in the temple, without any crowd or tumult* (Acts 24:17–18). This incident soon began Paul's Caesarean house arrest of AD 59–60, during which time he likely wrote Philemon, Colossians, Ephesians, and 2 Timothy. The chain of events begun with the delivery of the "alms" "after several years" (Acts 24:17) of work soon took Paul to Rome and, finally, to martyrdom. The delivery of the alms was a decisive event for the beginning of the end of the apostle's earthly life. It was the culmination of an effort of considerable duration and complexity. The collection was intricately intertwined with Paul's mission and theology. Of all the ways Paul might have defended or defined his vocation in front of Caesar's representative, he chose to reference the collection. All this is veiled by this significant but undetailed and lone remark in Acts, which is part of Paul's speech to Felix.

How significant was the great collection for Paul? To answer this question, we must look at the time (when?), people (who?), places (where?), and rationale (what for?) involved in the greatest New Testament work of Christian charity. To this end, I shall provide a brief commentary on 2 Corinthians 8 and 9. In preparing what follows, I have made extensive use of three resources: (1) Bo Reicke, *Re-examining Paul's Letters: The History of the Pauline Correspondence* (2001); (2) Hans Dieter Betz, *2 Corinthians*

2 Bo Reicke, *Re-examining Paul's Letters: The History of the Pauline Correspondence* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001), 10.

8 and 9: *A Commentary on Two Administrative Letters of the Apostle Paul* (1985); and (3) Keith F. Nickle, *The Collection: A Study in Paul's Strategy* (1966). Reicke provides a thoroughgoing yet concise and readable explanation of all issues relative to the dating of the Pauline corpus. Reicke takes a refreshingly positive view of the veracity, authenticity, and integrity of the Pauline corpus, yet with deep scholarly fidelity. Reicke also paints an invaluable picture of the struggle of first-century Judaism against its Roman and Greek world and how the Christian movement fits into the mix. While both Betz and Nickle regularly question the historical accuracy of Acts and question the integrity of 2 Corinthians, both provide an overwhelming wealth of sources, resources, information, and studied expertise on all matters relating to the collection and the Pauline texts. This paper could not have been written without these three resources.

I have not engaged critical arguments regarding the integrity of the text or the historicity of the New Testament as these issues are raised by study of the collection. The purpose of this paper is simply to summarize, but in a reasonably complete fashion, the issue of Paul's great collection and what it meant for the first century. It is my conviction that the collection's significance does not lie merely in the first century, but that these texts and their meaning and history have much to say to the church today regarding the church's corporate diakonic life.



THE COLLECTION TEXTS

Acts 11

(Events Took Place AD 46)

11:19 Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. ²⁰But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus. ²¹And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord. ²²The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. ²³When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose, ²⁴for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord. ²⁵So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, ²⁶and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.

²⁷Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. ²⁸And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world (this took place in the days of Claudius). ²⁹So the disciples determined, everyone according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. ³⁰And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.

Galatians 2

(Events Took Place AD 49)

2:1 Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. ²I went up because of a revelation and set before them (though privately before those who seemed influential) the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure I was not running or had not run in vain. ³But even Titus, who was with me, was not forced to be circumcised, though he was a Greek. ⁴Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in—who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery—⁵to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you. ⁶And from those who seemed to be influential (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)—those, I say, who seemed influential added nothing to me. ⁷On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised ⁸(for He who worked through Peter for his apostolic ministry to the circumcised worked also through me for mine to the Gentiles), ⁹and when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. ¹⁰Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.

1 Corinthians 16

(Spring AD 56)

16:1 Now concerning the collection for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do. ²On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come. ³And when I arrive, I will send those whom you accredit by letter to carry your gift to Jerusalem. ⁴If it seems advisable that I should go also, they will accompany me.

⁵I will visit you after passing through Macedonia, for I intend to pass through Macedonia, ⁶and perhaps I will stay with you or even spend the

winter, so that you may help me on my journey, wherever I go. ⁷For I do not want to see you now just in passing. I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits. ⁸But I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, ⁹for a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries.

¹⁰When Timothy comes, see that you put him at ease among you, for he is doing the work of the Lord, as I am. ¹¹So let no one despise him. Help him on his way in peace, that he may return to me, for I am expecting him with the brothers.

2 Corinthians 8 and 9

(Summer AD 57)

8:1 We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, ²for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. ³For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own free will, ⁴begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints—⁵and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us. ⁶Accordingly, we urged Titus that as he had started, so he should complete among you this act of grace. ⁷But as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in our love for you—see that you excel in this act of grace also.

⁸I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine. ⁹For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you by His poverty might become rich. ¹⁰And in this matter I give my judgment: this benefits you, who a year ago started not only to do this work but also to desire to do it. ¹¹So now finish doing it as well, so that your readiness in desiring it may be matched by your completing it out of what you have. ¹²For if the readiness is there, it is acceptable according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have. ¹³For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of fairness ¹⁴your abundance at the present time should supply their need, so that their abundance may supply your need, that there may

be fairness. ¹⁵As it is written, “Whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack.”

¹⁶But thanks be to God, who put into the heart of Titus the same earnest care I have for you. ¹⁷For he not only accepted our appeal, but being himself very earnest he is going to you of his own accord. ¹⁸With him we are sending the brother who is famous among all the churches for his preaching of the gospel. ¹⁹And not only that, but he has been appointed by the churches to travel with us as we carry out this act of grace that is being ministered by us, for the glory of the Lord Himself and to show our good will. ²⁰We take this course so that no one should blame us about this generous gift that is being administered by us, ²¹for we aim at what is honorable not only in the Lord’s sight but also in the sight of man. ²²And with them we are sending our brother whom we have often tested and found earnest in many matters, but who is now more earnest than ever because of his great confidence in you. ²³As for Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker for your benefit. And as for our brothers, they are messengers of the churches, the glory of Christ. ²⁴So give proof before the churches of your love and of our boasting about you to these men.

9:1 Now it is superfluous for me to write to you about the ministry for the saints, ²for I know your readiness, of which I boast about you to the people of Macedonia, saying that Achaia has been ready since last year. And your zeal has stirred up most of them. ³But I am sending the brothers so that our boasting about you may not prove empty in this matter, so that you may be ready, as I said you would be. ⁴Otherwise, if some Macedonians come with me and find that you are not ready, we would be humiliated—to say nothing of you—for being so confident. ⁵So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to go on ahead to you and arrange in advance for the gift you have promised, so that it may be ready as a willing gift, not as an exaction.

⁶The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. ⁷Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work. ⁹As it is written,