

## **If The Eagerness Is There**

### **2 Corinthians 8:7-15**

Now as you excel in everything; in faith, in speech,  
in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you,  
so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking.

I do not say this as a command,  
but I am testing the genuineness of your love  
against the earnestness of others.

For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor,  
so that by his poverty you might become rich.

And in this matter I am giving my advice:  
it is appropriate for you who began last year  
not only to do something but even to desire to do something  
now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched  
by completing it according to your means.

For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable  
according to what one has,  
not according to what one does not have.

I do not mean that there should be relief for others  
and pressure on you,  
but it is a question of a fair balance  
between your present abundance and their need,  
so that their abundance may be for your need,  
in order that there may be a fair balance.

As it is written, "The one who had much  
did not have too much,  
and the one who had little did not have too little."

# If The Eagerness Is There

2 Corinthians 8:7-15

June 30, 2024

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## I.

Wow, this sermon got out of hand in a hurry. Even before the first word was set to page, ideas were sprawling and running rampant every which way in all directions. On such an occasion, it is hard to know which path to follow first. However, one thing that seems readily apparent at the onset is what a privilege it is to even be *having* such thoughts; and from this arises a sense of great gratitude. Which is always a great place to begin, and an even better place to end.

Let us begin, then, with the situation at hand. Here in chapter 8 of his second letter to the Corinthian church we find the Apostle Paul exhorting that congregation to help contribute to the relief efforts Paul is spearheading on behalf of the saints in the Jerusalem church. It seems they have fallen on hard times due to famine and poverty, and are in dire need of financial support.

## II.

It is important to note that this collection for Jerusalem was no “oh, by the way” kind of thing. Instead, it is a significant thread woven into the very heart of Paul’s ministry and is referenced in his epistle to the Romans and cited in the Acts of the Apostles, as well as in the letters to the Corinthians. One can easily surmise that for Paul this collection was proof of his labors to bring the Gospel the gentiles by, now, returning a kind of first fruits to the Jewish Christians back in Jerusalem.

The Corinthian congregation, however, was a bit of a tough nut to crack as they are slow in contributing to the effort. So much so, that just a few verses earlier, at the start of Chapter 8, Paul essentially shames the Corinthians by recounting how the Macedonian churches, in spite of a severe ordeal of affliction, have given out of “their abundant joy and their extreme poverty (and) have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.” Meaning if *they* can do it so can *you*, Corinthians.

### III.

Of course, when it comes to Paul, there is always more going on than meets the eye. Which is something we have to admire about him. While the need in Jerusalem was certainly valid and pressing, for Paul this collection also served as something of a spiritual test for the Corinthian church. Paul says, "I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others." Would they join with the Macedonians in following the example of "the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for our sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty we might become rich?"

Here, though, is where things get interesting. While the actual offering Paul sought to collect was certainly important, even more so was *how* the Corinthians would give such a gift. Paul says, "For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what one does not have."

### IV.

For Paul, it isn't about how much one has, but the spirit in which one offers it. Even the smallest of gifts suffices and satisfies, but only if the eagerness is there to share it. It is this notion of eagerness upon which I would have us cast our gaze this morning. Transliterated from the Greek as *prothumia*, the word reads in English as: inclination, readiness, eagerness and willingness. More properly translated, though, the word means, "before-passion" referring to someone who is *already* being willing, i.e. has an eager disposition which is pre-inclined (*already* "ready and willing"). While this may seem as a rather modest, or even unnecessary nuance, for Paul it was of enormous importance; and it should be for all of us as well.

Though a slight variation on the theme, I remember a conversation I had with our one-time Executive Presbyter, Clint McCoy. A great many years ago, I was in the midst of considering leaving Canton and exploring a call to another church. The question he put to me was this, "Does it energize you?"

## V.

Early Friday morning I was walking around the house thinking about an example of eagerness I might offer as a sermon analogy. Seems I just could not settle myself down to start writing, and I realized it was because something else was stubbornly refusing to yield my attention. The night before I received a new tool, a laser level. For the past several weeks I've been working to reattached the deck to Linda's She Shack which a fallen tree had ripped up in January and, given that I was doing the work myself rather than paying another, I decided I was well within my bounds to purchase a new tool with some of the insurance money. Particularly, one which would greatly assist me with the job at hand.

Which is how I found myself at 5 a.m. setting up my camera tripod and affixing the laser level to the top and shooting a red line from the existing deck to the new foundation tube I intended to fill with concrete later that day. Good thing I did, I was off by a full inch.

## VI.

Of course, you can imagine my chagrin when, in the midst of all that, I realized the irony of my inability to come up with a sermon illustration for eagerness because I was too eager to try out my new laser level.

Possessing a sense of eagerness is one of life's sweetest fruits. One which becomes more rare as we age. Heck, kids can get fired up about anything, and at the drop of a hat. The older we get, however, the harder it seems to get the fire of eagerness lit under us. We get weighted down with the comfort of business as usual. The banal and blasé come to take up an increasing amount of space in our lives. We put more and more energy into what the body requires rather than what the heart and soul desire.

More than just a gift, eagerness is a privilege. For a great many people in this world eagerness is a luxury they cannot afford, or one which will not be afforded to them. Given this, *any* sense of eagerness, large or small, is cause for celebration and reason for gratitude.

## **VII.**

For Paul, eagerness is what gives clarity of purpose. Eagerness helps us to understand what matters and is important to us. It reveals our values and beliefs; to those around us, and to ourselves. Which is why it was so important to Paul that the Corinthian church have an eagerness about contributing to the Jerusalem collection.

It has been my experience that along with the proclivity for joy and celebration, spiritual eagerness is a tell-tale sign of the health and vigor of one's faith and, collectively, of one's church. Such an eagerness lightens the load in life, and makes us more engaged, equipped, and effective. Conversely, a lack of eagerness calls into question one's priorities, and challenges one's assumptions. For Paul and the Corinthian church, and for all of us here at *this* church, how and why things happen, is far more important than what actually gets accomplished.

## **VIII.**

By way of a few examples, it is my belief that one of the greatest accomplishments of our congregation is that kids are eager to come to church. This was certainly not my experience growing up. Last week I watched Emily, Kate and Rob eagerly clear out the entire nursery so the painter could begin work this week. Just about every week, Pat and Faye are eager to get in the garden to bring forth beautiful blooms for our enjoyment and to the glory of God. Today after church, Joe is eager to hang sheetrock in the Selleck Room. Which, if you know anything about hanging sheetrock, is pretty amazing.

Even more amazing is the eagerness with which all of you live out the truth and veracity of your faith in all the little things you do to nurture and support the work of this church. For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what one does not have.

## **IX.**

As the Apostle Paul knew full well, having an eagerness about one's faith is not merely a concern for "style points," nor is it necessarily getting all "Rah Rah" about Jesus. Instead, gauging one's eagerness to fully engage in our faith is a "check yourself" moment which reveals the authenticity of what we believe most deeply in our hearts. Even when the body is weak, so long as the

spirit is willing to lean *into* our faith we can rest assured that our convictions about what we have come to know and understand about God are deeply woven into the fabric of our lives.

While today's passage would make for an excellent Stewardship sermon, it has been my experience that it is the little things we are moved to do, and eager to do, which really tell the tale about the importance of one's faith to one's life, and the gratitude one has for such a life.

## **X.**

Gratitude is more than just thankfulness, it is what levels us out and trues us up. Gratitude is a "before-passion" what sends us sprawling and running rampant every which way in all directions such that it is hard to know which path to follow first. Gratitude is what energizes us to eagerness to pick a path and follow it to whatever destination that path will take us. And, yes, gratitude, like eagerness, is a *privilege*. A privilege which arises not from how much we have, but in how much we are willing to do with however little we have been given. If the eagerness is there, the little will always be enough. Amen.