TO HONOR THE LORD HIMSELF

2 Corinthians 8:16–9:5

Key Verse: 8:19

“What is more, he was chosen by the churches to accompany us as we carry the offering, which we administer in order to honor the Lord himself and to show our eagerness to help.”

Do you ever question people’s motives? Most of us do. Why do we do that? It’s because human beings are fundamentally so self-interested. It’s hard to trust people who’re actually doing things only for themselves, their own families, their own glory, their own honor. For trust to be built, we need to see proof that people’s motives are not selfish. But if selfishness can’t be trusted, what kind of motive *can* we trust? In today’s passage Paul uses the expression, “to honor the Lord himself.” When somebody is most interested in honoring Christ, that’s when we can fully trust that person. But in real life is can seem so rare. Most of us are so accustomed to being focused on ourselves and everybody around us is doing the same thing. Who’s actually serious about honoring Christ? What does that even mean? Is it real? And where does such a desire come from? May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his living word today.

Paul has already encouraged the Corinthians to prepare their hearts to participate in this special offering by reflecting on the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and on the inspiring generosity of the Macedonian believers (8:1–15). Now he introduces the three men who are carrying this letter, coming to Corinth ahead of him to help the believers prepare their offering practically. At first it might seem a bit strange—why was Paul sending these three men, and why was collecting the offering in advance so important? Paul anticipates these questions, explains, and urges the Corinthians to receive these men with love (8:24). Just as people were carefully watching what Paul was doing in collecting the offering, so they would be carefully watching the Corinthians, too (9:4,5). Collecting money to help poor people should be pretty simple, straightforward and always a good thing, right? So why were there so many questions? It’s because, as with many seemingly good deeds, the motives behind them are crucial. Was somebody in fact trying to profit personally from this offering? Was it all really about Paul promoting himself? Paul is writing to make these things crystal clear.

Look at 8:16,17. “Thanks be to God, who put it into the heart of Titus the same concern I have for you. For Titus not only welcomed our appeal, but he is coming to you with much enthusiasm and on his own initiative.” Paul is genuinely concerned about the Corinthians, and he reminds them that Titus is, too. In verse 6 he already mentioned how he’d urged Titus to go and help the Corinthians complete their offering contribution. Now he mentions it again. Why was Titus’ decision to agree to do this so impressive? Well, Titus had just come from Corinth and met Paul in Macedonia, reporting to him how they’d received his severe letter (7:6,7,13). Now Paul was “urging,” “appealing” Titus to turn around and go right back. Many people would have been frustrated with Paul’s demand, or reluctant. But Titus didn’t need to be pushed. Paul says Titus “welcomed” his appeal and was coming to Corinth “with much enthusiasm and on his own initiative.” Though he’s coming to help collect an offering, he’s doing it with a willing heart, with genuine love and real concern for people.

Look at 8:18,19a. “And we are sending along with him the brother who is praised by all the churches for his service to the gospel. What is more, he was chosen by the churches to accompany us as we carry the offering…” For some unknown reason Paul chooses not to mention the man’s name here, but he emphasizes that this man was well-known among all the churches in Macedonia. What was he well-known for? Since it was an offering matter, we might think he was good at managing money. Because they had a long journey, we might think he was good at finding the best route or good accommodations. But Paul says this man was praised by all the churches “for his service to the gospel.”

Who was he? Acts 19:29 tells us that in Ephesus Paul had a traveling companion from Macedonia with him during the riot. The man’s name was Aristarchus. He’s mentioned again in Acts 20:4 as being from Thessalonica, one of the Macedonian cities. When Paul began a church in Thessalonica on his second missionary journey, this man may very well been one of his first and most loyal converts. Acts 20:4 names Aristarchus on the list of delegates from all the Gentile churches who traveled with Paul to Jerusalem with the offering. In Acts 27:2 we see Aristarchus is again with Paul on his way to Rome in chains. In Colossians 4:10 Paul mentions Aristarchus once more as his “fellow prisoner.”

Whoever the man was in verses 18,19, he was well-known among the churches as someone who was zealous for the gospel. That was the main reason he was chosen. In carrying the offering the churches picked somebody who had a clear track record of being focused on spreading the gospel, someone with the utmost spiritual integrity. Paul was sending such a man along with Titus to make it clear what this offering was really all about.

Look at 8:19b. Paul says, “…which we administer in order to honor the Lord himself and to show our eagerness to help.” He’s making the purpose of this offering very clear. On one level this offering was for helping the needy believers in Jerusalem. But really it’s being given to honor the Lord himself—not to honor people, not to honor Paul, not to honor anybody else, but to honor Jesus himself. Paul mentions honoring Christ again in verse 23b. We’ll come back to this later. But here he goes on to explain why he’s sending this team to Corinth to collect the offering. Look at verses 20,21. “We want to avoid any criticism of the way we administer this liberal gift. For we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of man.” What does he mean? Paul is sending his best people on a team to collect this offering, so that they would hold each other accountable in handling the “liberal gift.” With such people as stewards of the money, people could trust that it wasn’t being stolen, misused or spent only on Paul’s favorite people. The expression “taking pains” means that sending these people was a real sacrifice. It also shows Paul’s wisdom and his humility. Many churches get into trouble for what they do with their offering. We can learn from Paul here to follow the important principles of transparency and accountability in regards to church money. Paul himself kept his hands out of it and sent these others to administer the offering collection. Likewise, whenever cash offerings are made at church, at least two trustworthy people should get together to count it and keep careful and accurate records. And they should not be people who might be tempted to take some for themselves.

Look at 8:22. “In addition, we are sending with them our brother who has often proved to us in many ways that he is zealous, and now even more so because of his great confidence in you.” This third person must have heard of the reports of the Corinthian believers, their sincere repentance and earnest desire to serve Jesus. He also had proved himself in many ways, to Paul and the others with him, that he was zealous. He’s yet another trustworthy person entrusted with the offering money. Read 8:23,24. We learn here how to see our fellow church members. In this passage Paul repeatedly calls them “brothers (18,22,23). He also calls them “partner” and “co-worker.” He adds the word “representatives” which in Greek is literally “apostles.” Humanly these three men might not seem impressive, but Paul had the greatest respect for them because of their lives lived for Jesus and his gospel. We shouldn’t focus on people’s weaknesses, or see them from a worldly point of view; if they are believers, we should view them as new creations and ambassadors of Christ (5:16,17,20a).

In 9:1–5 Paul helps the Corinthians to understand why it was important for them to prepare this offering in advance. Paul himself was planning to come to Corinth soon, with some other Macedonian brothers. If they showed up and the Corinthians’ offering wasn’t ready, it would be an embarrassing moment. Paul wanted this offering not to be “grudgingly given” in a desperate, last-minute scramble, but he repeats the words “generous gift” and adds “you had promised.” By sending this team in advance Paul wanted to help protect their reputation and build deep mutual respect among believers from many different places. Above all, Paul was administering this offering, sending such a team, preparing in advance, to be an honor to Christ himself (19b).

Honoring Christ isn’t just about offering; as Christians it’s got to be our way of life, right? But how can we truly live a life that honors Christ? What does it really mean? To honor Christ, first of all, we’ve got to believe in him. We’ve got to believe he’s real. Jesus really lived on earth, died on a cross and rose again. Now he’s really sitting at God’s right hand. And one day he really is going to come again as the Judge of the living and the dead. The Bible also says all things were created through him and for him, that he’s before all things, he’s the head of the church, and that in all things he should have the supremacy (Col1: 16–18). We’ve got to take these things about Jesus seriously and really believe them. We need to know that God the Father has glorified his Son, and that he wants us to honor his Son just as we would honor the Father (Jn8:54; 13:32; 5:23). We also need to know that God the Spirit is always working to glorify Jesus the Son (Jn16:14).

But knowledge and experience can be two very different things. In life we want to honor and glorify somebody only when we realize how great that person is, right? So to honor Christ, we’ve actually got to start thinking about him, his greatness. The problem is, in our sins we can’t do it. Our habit of constantly thinking about ourselves, our own interests, our own glory and honor, is too deeply ingrained. But God can make his light shine into our hearts. He can give us the light of the knowledge of his glory displayed in the face of Christ (2Co4:6). His Spirit can help us contemplate the glory of Christ, and he can transform us more and more into his image (2Co3:17,18). He can give us this genuine and fervent desire to honor Christ himself. Paul says, “So we make it our goal to please him” (2Co5:9). In all that we think, say or do, we first should be asking ourselves, “Does this please him? Does this bring honor to Christ himself?”

Paul puts it so simply, in poetic form, in 5:15, “And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.” This is at the heart of how and why we live to honor Christ. I remember how he died for me, and his great love moves me to really want to live for him. I remember that I’m no longer my own, that he bought me at the price of his own blood, so I want to honor him with my body (1Co6:19,20). Honoring Christ isn’t just about saying certain words or praying certain things or singing certain songs. Paul said, “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1Co10:31). He said, “And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Col3:17; cf. 1Pe4:11).

Still, as incorrigibly self-centered creatures, it can seem too hard for us. But as we’re united with Christ and have real fellowship with him in the Spirit, he helps us overcome our selfishness, get genuinely interested in others, and especially, he overwhelms us with the amazing humility and glory of Christ (Php2:1–11, 20,21). His glory gives us the courage, like Paul, to bear any kind of suffering, the passion to live and even to die for Christ (Php1:20,21).

Paul expressed the core reason for his entire ministry to the Gentiles with the phrase “for his name’s sake” (Ro1:5). It was kind of like Paul’s personal key verse. He believed that more and more people tasting God’s grace would bring greater and greater honor and glory to Christ (2Co4:15). For this same reason, in this letter Paul repeatedly writes about the credibility of his ministry (1:17; 2:17; 4:2; 5:12; 6:3; 8:20,21). It wasn’t really self-defense; in defending his ministry Paul is defending the honor and glory of our Lord Jesus Christ himself.

Let’s read 8:19b again. May God grant us his Spirit to help us get out of our self-centeredness. May he inspire us with a new passion to honor Christ in all we do. May he help us see one another from God’s point of view. And may he make us generous in our offerings in order to honor Christ himself.