

# **The Great Jerusalem Offering-Off**

**First of three sermons in the  
2022 Stewardship Commitment Series “*Becoming Richer*”  
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Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio  
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While on a visit to my sister’s home in Indiana a few years ago, she and her husband introduced us to a program called “The Great British Bake-Off.” (It’s called “The Great British Baking Show” in the U.S. because the term “Bake Off” is copyrighted by Pillsbury.)<sup>1</sup> Aspiring bakers from all walks of life are brought together in a charming outdoor kitchen studio. The program hosts present specific challenges for them to, well, bake stuff: “intricate breads, pastries, and desserts.”<sup>2</sup>

I had no idea that there were entire television programs based on the idea of turning the art of baking into a competition.

Radio and television have featured game shows since their earliest days. Those shows usually involved knowledge and occasionally some skill. But from those charming old shows we have seen an evolution.

Talent shows have become callously competitive. We see contestants on programs like “American Idol” and “America’s Got Talent” dismissed rudely and abruptly, without sensitivity to their feelings as amateur performers who had the courage to put themselves “out there.”

Or a program like “Storage Wars” entwines the curiosity of hoarding and the risk of gambling into a competition. Treasure hunters try to outbid others in order to take possession of mostly sight-unseen contents of repossessed storage lockers. It makes me wonder, When did cleaning out the garage become competitive?

And as if the dating scene isn’t stressful enough, programs like “The Bachelor” take the fragile process of developing interpersonal relationships and turn it into a competition. Hopeful suitors not only court a prospective partner but try to out-manuever others competing for the prized affection.

Many people enjoy those competition-based programs a lot. I can see why, even if they’re not my cup of tea.

But believe it or not, those competitive reality shows came to mind when I was studying the background for this series of sermons that I’m calling “Becoming Richer.” The series highlights this season in the life of the church when we consider our role as stewards or caretakers of this world and all it contains that God has entrusted to us. And the reason competition came to mind was because of a competition that St. Paul stirred up, a competition that was reported in 2 Corinthians Chapter 8.

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<sup>1</sup> [17 Great British Baking Show Behind-The-Scenes Facts \(buzzfeed.com\)](https://www.buzzfeed.com/food/the-great-british-baking-show-behind-the-scenes-facts) accessed 10/6/2021

<sup>2</sup> [‘The Great British Baking Show’ Cast of Bakers in 2021 \(marieclaire.com\)](https://www.marieclaire.com/entertainment/celebrity/the-great-british-baking-show-cast-of-bakers-in-2021) accessed 10/5/2021

So let's go back to the earliest days of the Christian movement. Some of the apostles were preaching and teaching in Jerusalem and the surrounding provinces of Palestine like Judea and Galilee. Others, like Paul, Timothy, Titus, and Luke had set out for more distant lands, preaching Christ to the people living in the regions we think of today as Syria, Turkey, and Greece.

Here was the reality that the Christian believers in Jerusalem were facing. Most of them were Jews who came to have faith in Jesus as God's promised Messiah. Their fellow Jews didn't believe that Jesus was the one they were to await. The Christian Jews would gather with one another for prayers and fellowship. But they also continued to participate in the life of the synagogue and temple.

Their presence became an annoyance to the Jews who didn't accept Jesus. The traditional Jews began to make things difficult for the Christian Jews: looking down upon them, discriminating against them. The Christian Jews felt closed out, harassed, ridiculed. They probably had a tough time selling their goods in the market, or being able to buy what they needed.

So to try to help the Christians in Jerusalem, Paul organized a collection for the church in Jerusalem. Paul approached the Christians in Corinth, Greece. Corinth was a center of commerce and education. Its people were proud of the international flavor of their city. They said, "Sure! We'll take up a collection for the Christians in Jerusalem."

Then Paul and his helpers moved up the Greek peninsula to the region of Macedonia. The Christians in the Macedonian towns like Thessalonica, Philippi and the countryside weren't as urbane as the Corinthians. The Macedonian Christians didn't tend to be as wealthy – indeed, some were quite poor. They were less educated, less worldly, more rustic. But when the Macedonians heard of the difficulty the Jerusalem Christians were facing, they didn't hesitate to respond.

Here's Paul's description of how the Macedonian Christians reacted to being invited to participate in the offering for the Jerusalem Christians:

<sup>3</sup>I assure you that they gave what they could afford and even more than they could afford, and they did it voluntarily. <sup>4</sup>They urgently begged us for the privilege of sharing in this service for the saints. <sup>5</sup>They even exceeded our expectations....<sup>3</sup>

Yes, Paul and his helpers were blown away by the eagerness and generosity of the Christians in Macedonia.

In the meantime, word reached Paul that the Christians back in Corinth had stalled in their campaign to collect an offering for the Jerusalem Christians. So Paul wrote them the letter we heard from in 2 Corinthians Chapter 8. In the minds of the Corinthians Paul started a competition between them and the humble Macedonians to the north. How? Listen to some of what he wrote to the Corinthians:

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<sup>3</sup> 2 Corinthians 8:3-5 CEB

- You're the best in everything you do; be the best in this work of charity too.
- I'm not giving an order... but thought you should know what others are doing... even the poor Macedonians up north.
- I'm just giving you my opinion on this.... But you're the ones who started this last year, and were eager to do it. Don't you want to finish with the enthusiasm you started with?

It sure sounds like Paul was trying to strike the Corinthians' competitive nerve. He dropped some veiled hints. Maybe added a pinch of guilt. In the vein of "The Great British Bake-Off" it seems to me that Paul was turning this into "The Great Jerusalem Offering-Off."

So that collection to benefit the Jerusalem Christians is the background for this year's stewardship theme. The theme, which I'm calling "Becoming Richer," is taken from a verse in 2 Corinthians Chapter 9. In that letter Paul wrote, "You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous in every way."

By the theme "Becoming Richer" I am not endorsing that branch of Christianity "that promises a direct path to the good life. It is called by many names, but most often it is nicknamed the 'prosperity gospel' for its bold central claim that God will give you your heart's desires: money in the bank, a healthy body, a thriving family, and boundless happiness."<sup>4</sup> Promoters of the "prosperity gospel" tell you that you simply have to believe that God is going to shower you with blessings, and if it doesn't happen, it's because you didn't pray enough or pray the right way or your faith wasn't sufficient—in other words, it's your own fault. Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker were the most prominent hawkers of this scheme. It generated their own personal prosperity until he was convicted of financial fraud.

But for us, "Becoming Richer" reminds us that our lives become richer as we embrace the mind and heart of Jesus, growing in the ability to love even the hard-to-love, learning the blessing of being forgiving, looking for reasons to be thankful even in the midst of everyday life.

It's good for our souls to stop, to observe a season in which we reflect on our role as caretakers or stewards of the gifts God has entrusted to us. In verse 10 Paul reminded us that all that we are and all that we have is the result of God's generous, undeserved goodness. Paul wrote, "The one who supplies seed for planting and bread for eating will supply and multiply your seed and will increase your crop, which is righteousness."<sup>5</sup> When we pause and consider the blessings upon blessings that we so easily overlook and take for granted in our lives, we realize that Yes, our lives are "becoming richer" day by day and moment by moment because we live with trust in God's unconditional love and God's undeserved generosity.

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<sup>4</sup> [I'm a scholar of the "prosperity gospel." It took cancer to show me I was in its grip. - Vox](#) accessed 10/7/2021

<sup>5</sup> 2 Corinthians 9:10 Common English Bible

So what can we do? How can we respond? Recall the reaction of the Macedonian Christians. When they learned about the opportunity to share the gifts God had given them—to share their treasures for the sake of their sisters and brothers in Jerusalem—when they heard about that, the Macedonians eagerly asked for the privilege to participate. Regardless how mighty or meek the scope of their possessions, it actually made them feel joy, feel encouraged to express their gratitude to God by sharing for the sake of others.

In our giving we are not in competition with each other. We have different amounts of resources at our disposal. But for each of us, sharing from what we have will give us joy. As we heard from Paul in verse 12, “<sup>12</sup>If you are eager to give, God will accept your gift on the basis of what you have to give, not on what you don't have.”<sup>6</sup>

The truth of that verse is illustrated in a simple act that occurred several decades ago in the San Francisco area. The Russian River in northern California floods the town of Guerneville on average about every ten to fifteen years. Shortly after one of the river's most devastating floods many years ago, the president of the town's Rotary Club received a letter from the president of a Rotary Club in the central African nation of Burundi, one of the poorest countries in Africa. The letter read, “A club even as poor as ours wishes to share this modest contribution from the members in response to the flood that has devastated your area. We trust this minute contribution would display our solidarity with you in your time of grief.” Enclosed was a check for \$200.<sup>7</sup>

What that letter expressed on behalf of those people in far-off Africa we know to be true in our church, too. Sharing in the support of the ministry of this church to care for peoples' spiritual and physical needs gives us joy and offers encouragement to others. We're not in competition with each other in our giving. Each of us is blessed and empowered by God with the capacity to respond to this church's appeal. For as we heard from the pen of St. Paul, “You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous in every way.”

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<sup>6</sup> 2 Corinthians 8:12 Good News Translation

<sup>7</sup> Attributed to a column by Herb Caen, *San Francisco Chronicle*, adapted with information from [when have there been floods in Guerneville, California? - Bing](#) accessed 10/6/2021