

**“NOW FINISH THE WORK”**  
***2 Corinthians 8:1-15***

I don't know how it is with you, but reading through the Bible systematically doesn't set me on fire every single day. Sometimes the words sink in: other times they lurk around the surface of your consciousness and then seem to disappear. Now and then, though, a passage leaps out of the pages of the Bible and hits me between the eyes. Some people describe it as “the Lord laid a word on my heart”. Less pious folk say, “Gosh! That's just so relevant to what's going on at the moment.” All this is leading up to my saying that I was reading through *2 Corinthians* a few weeks back and the words I'm about to read you struck me immediately as a message for us here at Wade Street Church at this particular time, as one phase of the development ends and we embark on the second and final phase – but need the money to get it all finished. And when I read them through in another translation (as I often do when I'm preparing a sermon), the words used in that particular version made it seem even more appropriate. So let me read to you from *2 Corinthians 8:1-15* from the New Living Translation. If you are just a visitor here today, I hope you'll bear with us for a few moments as we explore this passage.

**Read passage**

It's one of those passages that really doesn't need much commentary: I hope the message of it is pretty clear, but so you don't think you're not getting your money's worth out of the preacher, I'll fill in a bit of the background and just emphasise one or two thoughts from the passage. This is the second – possibly even the third – letter Paul has written to the Christians in Corinth. Partly he is setting out his credentials as an apostle ahead of a first visit to them. Partly he is responding to some fairly harsh criticism he's been getting from some of the leaders in the church there. And partly he is appealing for funds from the relatively rich Greeks to help the believers in the Jerusalem church who are going through a very rough time indeed. His first letter stirred up a good deal of enthusiasm amongst the Greek believers to help financially, and the Macedonians, to the north of the region, have been pretty generous. Here Paul is reminding the Corinthian believers that they need to get on and get their contribution sorted out. The parallels between what Paul has to say to this church in Corinth and what we need to hear here in Lichfield are amazing. Let's just run through them.

Despite the strained relations between Paul and the Corinthian hierarchy, he is remarkably generous in his praise. He talks in v7 of their **EXCELLENCE**. I don't think it's being too self-congratulatory to suggest that the same things might have been said of us. “*You have so much faith, such gifted speakers, such knowledge, such enthusiasm and such love for us*”, writes Paul. Many of you perhaps don't have the privilege that I do of meeting with folk from other churches in the area, from the URC synod and from the Baptist Association. But this church here is very highly regarded by many. And we do have a number of gifted speakers; we do get involved in things with enthusiasm; we are able, through our representatives on other bodies, to share our knowledge and expertise. Of course, there are still very many areas in which we need to do a great deal of work and improvement. But in some ways this church does excel. So, as Paul says, let's also “*excel in this gracious ministry of giving*”, particularly when it comes to providing the resources to finish off this development.

Because, like the Corinthians' attitude to the Jerusalem Relief Fund, we started off with a great deal of **ENTHUSIASM**. That's what Paul is saying to them in vv10,11. It seemed a great idea at the time – and it was – but as the weeks and months went by the initial impetus began to tail off. It's only natural, really. Other things come along and capture our imagination. Other issues demand attention. But that initial enthusiasm needs to be rekindled if we are to get on and finish the work as we first believed God wanted us to. After all, there's no going back.

Over the past few weeks, though, there has been a growing sense of **EXCITEMENT** as we've seen the new facilities taking shape. It was wonderful standing in church a couple of weeks ago when the

hoarding had first come down to reveal this area at the front, and watching people's faces as they came into church – particularly those who have been part of the church for a long time. There is a sense of excitement about the possibilities of this place, about the ways in which the original vision can now be honed down and the detail put in. We can now express our worship in a way that includes something of that extravagance we considered a couple of weeks ago when we read the story of the woman anointing Jesus with the perfume. We now have a resource for discipleship which can be used to enable all of us to grow in our relationship with Christ. We will have a splendid set of rooms which can be made available as a resource to the community here at the heart of the city. Doesn't that excite you?

If it does, then that needs to be translated into an **EAGERNESS** to give so that the project can be carried through to completion. We want it finished now – and the more we give and the sooner we give it the quicker the remaining areas can be kitted out and brought into use. All of us can participate in some way or other. Paul is very realistic here in his approach to appealing for money. He certainly has no hesitation in doing so,, despite his apparent coyness in v8. I know some churches seem to make a ministry of appealing for money, but it is something I'm not comfortable with and we have tried very hard not to make too much fuss about it here over the past few years. However, from time to time we need to spell out the fact that this is not going to happen without the significant giving of the congregation here – the congregation that voted to go ahead with this in the first place.

Paul says that we should be eager to give whatever our actual means. We give according to what we've got. So there is no target per person that must be reached, but an understanding that those who can afford it will give more than those whose circumstances are more constrained. Giving is one way in which we can all participate in this. Some of you have given substantially of your time and expertise. Some of you have excelled in prayer. But all of us have some disposable income which we can put to the service of the Kingdom of God here in this place.

Elsewhere Paul sets out for the Corinthian Christians what he himself has sacrificed for the good of the gospel. Here he gives us a glimpse of the ultimate **EXAMPLE** of giving, of sacrifice – the Lord Jesus Christ. He was rich, rich in way we can never fully imagine. He shared the full glory of heaven with his father. He ruled over the whole universe and the very courts of heaven. He had all the power and authority and majesty and splendour that there could possibly be at his disposal. Yet he gave it up and "*became poor*" for you and me, in order that we might be able to share in his riches for eternity. Jesus came into our world as a vulnerable, fallible, weak, poor human being. He underwent humiliation, suffering and death for you and me. That's what we're remembering here through the symbols of bread and wine this morning. He became poor so that we might become rich.

I doubt whether any of us here will become poor through our giving to the work of the church, but we may find ourselves having to do without some of life's little luxuries for a bit. That's the sacrifice that we make in order to respond to the sacrifice that Jesus so generously made for us. We're not getting this building finished for the denominations of which we're a part. We're not doing it for the elders or for the memory of those who have gone before. We're not doing it for the minister or for ourselves – or even for the community. We're doing it for Jesus. And leaving it half-finished while we feather our own nests or attend to our won personal priorities is not honouring to him, nor is it a good witness to the people who live around us here.

Next Saturday and Sunday we will be celebrating what has happened so far. During Saturday afternoon representatives of the local community will be here – and some of you. In the evening it will be mostly folk from the congregation here so we will have an opportunity to make an offering to the fund. (For those who can't make Saturday, you can give on Sunday, if you want.) We have a week to think and pray about this, to find the cheque book or get the money transferred or whatever. We began this project with enthusiasm, we have watched it with growing excitement. Now, with eagerness let us "*carry this project through to completion*", for the glory of God and in grateful response to the amazing sacrifice of Jesus for each and every one of us.