

This Changes Everything

Part #1 - "Generosity"

Text: 2 Corinthians 8-9

~ Delivered at Central Baptist Church on December 3, 2017 by Pastor Barton Priebe

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** Today we begin a new four part series for Advent called, "This Changes Everything." In this series we want to show how the birth of Christ was *the* turning point in the history of the universe. It changed everything.
 - Today I want to talk about how the message of Christmas changes the way we use our wealth, particularly to help other Christians who are in crisis.
- A few months ago, Central Baptist voted overwhelmingly in favour of sponsoring a refugee family from Eritrea at a cost of \$34,000.
 - For safety and security reasons we cannot give their first names but their last name is very common so we are free to use that. They are the Ghebremeskel (geb-re-mes-kal) family. They have three children. They are Christians and they are in a time of crisis. As you have heard, the father was serving his mandatory 18 months in the military but was forcibly detained for 15 years. During this time he was beaten, imprisoned, and denied opportunity to see his wife and children. He and his family risked everything and fled across a desert border to Sudan. You would think that a crisis like this could not get any worse but it did. ISIS fighters began raiding the refugee camp to steal children for ransom or to sell their organs on the black market. They had to flee the refugee camp and are now in hiding lest he be deported back to Eritrea.
 - So today's message is about calling us to follow through on the commitment that we have made to this family. They are of a different ethnic and cultural background than us. They speak a different language than us but they are our fellow Christians and they are in crisis.
- So in order that I might stir up your hearts to give generously I want to take us this morning to a parallel situation that happened in the New Testament. It occurred in the church in Jerusalem – a church made up of mostly Jewish Christians. This church, and the entire area, was experiencing a major financial crisis that left them impoverished. We do not know exactly *why* this occurred but we do know exactly *how* Christians across the Roman Empire responded.
 - In Galatians 2 Paul visits the church in Jerusalem and meets with James, Peter, and John. They make only one request of Paul. Gal 2:10 says: "***Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.***" One commentator then writes, "***Little did the Jerusalem leaders know that their suggestion would become Paul's obsession for nearly two decades.***"¹
 - Paul started a massive fundraising campaign among the churches across the Roman Empire. These churches were made of up Gentile Christians, that is, Christian with different ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds than those in Jerusalem. You read Paul talking about this campaign in Romans, in Galatians, and in 1 Corinthians.

¹ S. McKnight, "Collection for the Saints," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, eds. G.F. Hawthorn, R.P. Martin, and D.G. Reid (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993), 143.

- However, his biggest discussion about this campaign comes in 2 Corinthians 8-9. You see the Corinthians had committed to giving but had not followed through. Paul writes to call them to follow through on their commitment.
 - How does he do this? Two years ago when we were raising funds for the Choumou-Bokhit family from Sudan I preached on this passage and showed you that Paul reminds them of the message of Christmas – how Jesus, even though he was rich, became poor in giving up his glory and becoming a man to die for us so that we through his poverty might become rich. That is Paul’s dominant argument.
- However, I want to look at this passage again because there is another way he encourages them to give. It also has everything to do with Christmas.
 - Like the air you breath, it is everywhere in this text. But just as you took your last breath and did not even think about it, you likely did not even notice it. The concept is expressed in one word but the reason this word did not hit you with tremendous force is because the radical individualism of the western culture you were raised in makes it almost impossible for you to feel its power.
 - So this morning I want to recapture a vision for something that has been lost in western culture. This vision has everything to do with Christmas. This vision has everything to do with giving financial aid to Christians who are in crisis. This vision has everything to do with helping Christians who are of different ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds than us.
- The vision that has been lost, but that I want to recapture this morning, is the vision of the church as a family.
 - I am going to break this message into two contrasting parts. In part 1, I want to talk about the lost vision of the church as a family. Then in part 2, I want to talk about recapturing the vision of the church as a family.
 - We will then finish the message with a big story.

THE LOST VISION OF THE CHURCH AS A FAMILY

- Let’s begin with part 1, which is **(SHOW SLIDE 2)** the lost vision of the church as a family.
 - So what is the word I am referring to? It is right there in verse 1. **READ 1** - *“We want you to know, brothers.”* He brings up the fact that they are brothers. So this entire discussion of chapters 8-9 is immediately set within the context that they are brothers in the same family. But when you read that you say, “So what? It’s just one word. What’s the big deal?”
 - Well here is a clue that it is a big deal. Paul loves to use this term. In fact, he uses it 139 times in his letters. Here in 2 Corinthians he opens the letter by referring to Timothy as their brother and has a reference in 2:13 to Titus as a brother. Then there is no reference to “brother” in chapter 3, no reference in chapter 4, no reference in chapter 5, no reference in chapter 6, and no reference in chapter 7. Then suddenly, when Paul changes topic and starts talking about this fundraising campaign in chapters 8-9, he uses the term six times. The first reference is here in verse 1. He then talks about sending two people to Corinth to receive the money and purposely refers to them as “brothers” (c.f. 2 Cor 8:1,18, 22, 23; 9:3, 5).

- In other words, these two chapters have a disproportionately large amount of family imagery in comparison to the rest of the letter. Why is that?
- The Christians in Corinth knew why. The whole ancient world knew why. Most of the world today, that is not western, knows why. But we do not know why.
 - Dr. Joseph Hellerman, who is the professor of New Testament Language and Literature at Talbot School of Theology in California, helps us to understand. He says we have to understand how people think in ancient societies and in almost all non-western societies today.
 - He gives three principles that will get us into their thinking and thereby help us grasp the power of this family imagery.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 3)** Principle #1: In the New Testament world (and much of the non-western world today) the group took priority over the individual.
 - Western culture is marked by *radical individualism*. This is so obvious it hardly needs explaining. Hellerman writes the following: **(SHOW SLIDE 4)** *“We have been socialized to believe that our own dreams, goals, and personal fulfillment ought to take precedence over the well-being of any group—our church, or our family, for example—to which we belong. The immediate needs of the individual are more important than the long-term health of the group. So we leave and withdraw, rather than stay and grow up, when the going gets rough in the church or in the home.”*²
 - In sharp contrast to this, almost every other society in the history of the world assumes that the good of the individual is bound up in the good of the group so that the needs of the group must come first, whether that group is your village or your religious community. The group comes first.
- One of the easiest examples of this is marriage. An individualist culture like ours thinks that the idea of arranged marriages is crazy and even oppressive. The individualist says, *“How can you allow your parents to choose a man whom you hardly know? You might end up in misery. This is a terrible system.”*
 - But then the woman from a group-focused culture says, *“If your culture is so right why do almost half of your marriages end up in divorce? How can you act so independently of your parents and enter into a marriage which may harm the long term well being of your extended family?”*
 - So an individualistic culture puts a high value on personal fulfillment and happiness: my needs trump all things. A group culture places high value on the honour and health of the group: the needs of the group trump all things I need to sacrifice for the good the group.
 - The Bible is written in a group-focused culture. This is not to say that it endorses everything about this is important to understand.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 5)** Principle #2: In the New Testament world a person’s most important group was his or her blood family.
 - So the group came first and the most important group was your blood family.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 6)** Principle #3 – In the New Testament world the closest family bond was not the bond of marriage. It was the bond between siblings.

² Joseph H. Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family: Recapturing Jesus’ Vision for Authentic Christian Community* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2009), 3.

- This is not to say that marriages were devoid of romance and love but, in most societies, marriage was viewed more as the way to build a strong group through continuing the bloodline.
 - Even when a woman got married she still felt her closest bond to be with her siblings because they were her blood.
- These three fundamental principles had two major implications.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 7)** Implication #1: the central value that characterized ancient family relations was the obligation to demonstrate undying loyalty toward one's blood brothers and sisters.
 - The group comes first. Your blood family is the most important group. So no matter what happens you show undying loyalty to your family.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 8)** Implication #2: the most treacherous act of human disloyalty was not disloyalty to one's spouse. It was betrayal of one's brother.
 - We see this in Genesis 4. Genesis 4 is the first story after humanity rebels against God in Genesis 3. It is placed there to show the horrific effects of sin. Now what is the sin of Genesis 4 that so reveals the depth of human depravity? We who are from an individualistic culture say it is murder. But we have missed the larger point. It isn't just murder. It is murder of one's brother.
- With all this background, I trust you are beginning to see that this idea of family and loyalty to one's brothers and sisters, carried far more weight in the world of the New Testament than today.
 - You did everything for your family. You sacrificed all for your family. Your greatest allegiance was to your blood brothers and sisters.
 - But here is the big point: The New Testament takes all of this and redefines your family as other Christians, as the church. In fact, the dominant metaphor for the church in the New Testament is the family of God.

RECAPTURING A VISION OF THE CHURCH AS A FAMILY

- We have lost this vision of the church as family but let me turn us now to part 2: **(SHOW SLIDE 9)** recapturing a vision of the church as a family.
 - To recapture this we must go again to the message of Christmas. Why did Jesus come into the world? Listen to Galatians 4: ***“But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!”***
 - The message of Christmas is that God the Father wanted to make a family. He sent His Son into this world to rescue us out of slavery to sin. But his goal was not just to set us free and leave us alone in the world. No, he freed us in order to adopt us into his family and to give us the full status of sons and daughters.
 - The great early church father, Irenaeus, says it so well: **(SHOW SLIDE 10)** ***“For it was for this end that the Word of God was made man, and He who was the***

Son of God became the Son of man, that man, having been taken into the Word, and receiving the adoption, might become the son of God.³

- The message of Christmas then is that you are saved out of sin and given a new family. God is your Father. Jesus is your elder brother. Other Christians are your brothers and sisters.
 - The church is your family. This was controversial in Jesus' day because it called for people to love Jesus and his people more than their own families. It is controversial today because it calls us to deny radical individualism and to give undying loyalty to other believers as our brothers and sisters.
 - There are a lot of implications to this but today we are focusing on just one: that is, our responsibility to give financial aid to our brothers and sisters in crisis.
- Are you starting to feel the power of 2 Corinthians 8-9? Paul begins the entire discussion by referring to the Corinthians as "Brothers." This means that the entire discussion in chapters 8-9 is to be read in light of reality that believers are family.
 - Paul is so passionate about this fundraising campaign because it is a tangible expression of the unity of God's global family. Apart from salvation in Jesus there were massive divisions between Jews and Gentiles. They had different ethnic backgrounds, different cultural backgrounds, and they spoke different languages. But in Jesus all those dividing walls of hostility had been broken down.
 - We are now family for as Galatians 3:25 says, "***In Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. . . . There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.***"
 - Brothers and sisters may be very different from each other but the family bond trumps all divisions. This is why Paul writes the term "brothers" six times in two chapters. He is *reminding* them that they are family and calling them to *act* in light of it.
- Anthropologists, those who study human culture, tell us that we do normally use the formal terms "brother," "sister," "father" or "mother" in everyday use except in two ways. The first is simply to explain a relationship: "***Richard and Kevin are my brothers.***" The other way we use it as an emotional tool to get someone to act in light of the fact that they are family.
 - I do not usually remind my children that they are brothers and sisters. I use that term when they aren't acting like it and I want them to act like it.
 - I will say, "***Jessica, be patient with Josh. He's your brother.***" Or, "***Tyler, help Emily when she asks you. She's your sister.***" Kids do this with parents as well. I got a note a few weeks ago that pulled out all this language: "***Dearest Father. How would you like the opportunity to spend some quality time with your best daughter by taking her to Tim Hortons?***"

³ Irenaeus of Lyons, "Irenaeus against Heresies," in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, vol. 1, The Ante-Nicene Fathers (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2004), 448.

- Hellerman says, **(SHOW SLIDE 11)** *“We generally reserve family language for those times when we want to do a little social engineering; that is, when we want a child or a sibling or a parent to act in a way appropriate to the family relationship.”*⁴
 - This is what Paul is doing in 2 Corinthians 8-9. For five chapters Paul has not used this term. But when he wants to call on them to follow through on their commitment to give toward the crisis in Jerusalem, he suddenly uses the term six times.
- My dear brothers and sisters, the message of Christmas is that God sent Jesus into this world to rescue us in order that he might bring us into his family. The Father’s family is made up of people from all different ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds.
 - Outside of Christ all of these things divide us. But family trumps all things. If you are a Christian then the Ghebremeskel’s are your brothers and sisters. You have more in common with them than you do you’re your blood relatives who are not Christians.
 - This is why Paul writes in Gal 5: *“So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.”*

THE EARLY CHURCH AS FAMILY

- The early church exploded in numbers for many reasons but one of the primary reasons was the way that Christians cared for one another, particularly in material ways.
 - It was when Christians acted like family in caring for each other that the world sat up and took notice.
- So let me tell you one of those stories. It took place in 253 A.D.. A famous Christian leader named Cyprian received a letter telling him of a great crisis among the Christians living in an area of North Africa called Numidia. Bandits had raided the area, kidnapped many Christians, and were selling them into slavery. The pastors in Numidia wrote Cyprian to ask for funds to buy them back. Cyprian’s reply and the response of the Christians from his part of the world is nothing short of astounding.
 - The letter is only two pages long. I have printed copies that you can pick up at the Info Desk but let me read some selections for you. Listen to the strong family language and how that reality shapes his response.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 12)** *“With excessive grief of mind, and not without tears, dearest brethren, I have read your letter which you wrote to me from the solicitude of your love, concerning the captivity of our brethren and sisters. For who would not grieve at misfortunes of that kind, or who would not consider his brother’s grief his own, since the Apostle Paul speaks, saying, “Whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member rejoice, all the members rejoice with it.” . . . Wherefore now also the captivity of our brethren must be reckoned as our captivity, and the grief of those who are endangered is to be esteemed as our grief, since indeed there is one body of our union; and not love only, but also religion, ought to instigate and strengthen us to redeem the members of the brethren.”*
 - Can you feel Cyprian’s emotion? Even though he has not met these Christians, he views them as his brothers and sisters.

⁴ Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family*, 87.

- He then goes on to speak about how he sees the sufferings of Christ in his captive brothers and sisters and again expresses it in family terms.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 13)** *Christ is to be contemplated in our captive brethren, and He is to be redeemed from the peril of captivity who redeemed us from the peril of death; so that He who took us out of the jaws of the devil, who abides and dwells in us, may now Himself be rescued and redeemed from the hands of barbarians by a sum of money—who redeemed us by His cross and blood—who suffers these things to happen for this reason, that our faith may be tried, whether each one of us will do for another what he would wish to be done for himself, if he himself were held captive among barbarians. For who that is mindful of humanity, and reminded of mutual love, if he be a father, will not now consider that his sons are there; if he be a husband, will not think that his wife is there kept captive.”*
- He then writes about how he and the brothers and sisters in his area will respond.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 14)** *Our brotherhood, considering all these things according to your letter, and sorrowfully examining, have all promptly and willingly and liberally gathered together supplies of money for the brethren. . . . We have then sent you a sum of one hundred thousand sesterces, which have been collected here in the Church over which by the Lord’s mercy we preside, by the contributions of the clergy and people established with us, which you will there dispense with what diligence you may.*
- Due to many different factors it is almost impossible to gauge exactly how much this is but some estimates done in 2005 suggest that one sesterces was about \$1.55 USD. So this could be around \$155,000 USD or it could be a whole lot more. Regardless, this is a large sum of money that was raised to aid the brothers and sisters in this great time of crisis. And then listen to how he ends the letter.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 15)** *And we wish, indeed, that nothing of such a kind may happen again, and that our brethren, protected by the majesty of the Lord, may be preserved safe from perils of this kind. If, however, for the searching out of the love of our mind, and for the testing of the faith of our heart, any such thing should happen, do not delay to tell us of it in your letters, counting it for certain that our church and the whole fraternity here beseech by their prayers that these things may not happen again; but if they happen, that they will willingly and liberally render help.*

CONCLUSION

- My dear brothers and sisters. You have never met the Ghebremeskels. They are of a different ethnic, cultural, and linguistic background than you. But they are family. They are brothers and sisters and family trumps everything.
 - The leaders of Central Baptist, like Cyprian, have received a letter via email telling us of their crisis. We like, the Corinthians have committed to giving of our finances to rescue this family.
 - So let us follow through on that commitment. Let the message of Christmas fill you with joy that God is your Father and you are part of his family. Let this joy overflow in generosity toward our brothers and sister who are in this time of crisis.