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# “St. Paul’s Sneaky Fundraising Letter”

Romans 15:22-33

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*I have so often been hindered from coming to you. But now, with no further place for me in these regions, I desire, as I have for many years, to come to you when I go to Spain. For I do hope to see you on my journey and to be sent on by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a little while.*

*At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem in a ministry to the saints, for Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to share their resources with the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. They were pleased to do this, and indeed they owe it to them, for if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material things. So, when I have completed this and have delivered to them what has been collected, I will set out by way of you to Spain, and I know that when I come to you, I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ.*

*I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in earnest prayer to God on my behalf, that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea and that my ministry to Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, so that by God's will I may come to you with joy, and be refreshed in your company.*

*The God of peace be with all of you. Amen.*

*Romans 15:22-33*

If there was a first century class in persuasive letter writing, persuasive on the edge of manipulative letter writing, St. Paul should have taught it. If you ever need to write a letter to raise funds for hungry children, you could learn a lot from Paul. This is what he writes:

Dear Friends in Rome,

It has taken me too long to finally get around to visiting you. There were so many other places I had to get to first. But now that there is no place left without a church where I can start one, and since I have looked forward to visiting you for years, I am planning to come. I am eventually going to Spain. My idea is to stop off in Rome on the way to enjoy a good visit with you good people.

I hope that when we are done, you will send me off with God's blessing. Hint, hint. God's blessing means hunger offering.

The next trip I am taking is to Jerusalem to deliver the hunger offering that other churches have already given. The churches in Greece—Macedonia and Achaia—took up a huge collection. Isn't that great? Those churches are really something, aren't they? That is what churches should do.

They were happy to give to the hungry, but they also knew it was their duty. They are real Christians. They are genuinely spiritual. They are actually generous.

They know that if we are going to follow Jesus, we have to share what we have with the hungry. If we do not give to the hungry, we are not following Jesus. I am sure you know that.

As soon as I have handed over their wonderful offering, I will head to your place. My hope is that my visit to your church is going to be another great moment of celebrating God's love and your amazing generosity.

I do have one request, dear friends. Pray that I will not die in Jerusalem. I am going even though I could be killed there. That is how important it is to me that we get these gifts to the hungry.

After Jerusalem, I will come see you, looking forward to being flabbergasted by your generosity.

Love to all of you at the church in Rome.

Paul uses guilt, pride, sneaky threats, love, everything he can think of to get a bigger hunger offering out of them. Paul assumes Christians have to give to feed the hungry. In the early church, when they took up an offering during worship, the money did not go to support the institution, but to feed the hungry. Imagine what Paul would write to us:

Dear Friends in Brooklyn,

Like a lot of people, I have wanted to visit Plymouth Church for a long time, I have heard what a fantastic congregation you are. I have been busy visiting struggling churches that are not doing as well as you are. But I have got to make a trip to Manhattan, so my plan is to come to Plymouth and enjoy a Sunday with you.

I hope that when we are done, you will send me off with God's blessing, wink, wink. God's blessing means hunger offering. The next thing on my to-do list is an offering for the hungry. Churches all over the United States are taking up collections to buy chickens for starving families in India. Isn't that great? Churches that care about the hungry are really something, aren't they? That is what good churches do.

I am guessing there are good Christians down the street from you at Grace Church and at First Pres who care about hungry children. I wonder how much they give. They are happy to give to the hungry, but they also know that it is not really an optional activity for genuine Christians. I am

sure you have generous people at Plymouth, too. I guess we will see.

And I know some of you are really good at making money. You make a lot of money. You are smart and capable and you have done well for yourself. Now you have the chance to share what you have made.

You care about people. You care about your children. You care about starving children.

I will come to your church and pick up what I am sure will be a big addition to the offering. My visit to Plymouth will be a great day of celebrating God's love and your amazing generosity.

I hope you will pray about it. I worry about this offering, because nothing is more important than getting food to the hungry. I am looking forward to being overwhelmed by your big-heartedness.

Love to all of you at Plymouth Church.

If Paul was writing to our congregation, he would be persuasive and maybe a little manipulative. He would be disappointed that we still need hunger offerings. But we do.

730 million people wake up every morning with little hope of enough to eat. 195 million of them are, by the way, Christians. 258 million are dealing with malnutrition. This is an increase from 193 million before Covid. Put all the hungry in single file, and they will circle the globe 25 times.

25,000 people a day, 10,000 children, die of hunger-related diseases. Malnutrition is responsible for nearly half the deaths of children under five (United Nations Children's Fund). Three to four hundred starve to death in the time it takes to preach a sermon on hunger.

The numbers do not break our hearts like the pictures do. We see photos of children with bellies swollen, legs and arms like sticks, and eyes vacant. A gaunt mother holds a tiny bundle of skin and bones to her chest. Children eat spilled flour off the ground at a makeshift feeding station. An elderly man stands waiting for a handful of rice, but collapses before he gets to the front of the line.

Starvation is caused by conflict, Covid, climate change, government corruption, corporate corruption, and income inequality. Conflict results in people being driven from their homes and jobs and becoming unable to find food. The war in Ukraine is affecting global food production. Measures to prevent the spread of the coronavirus reduced the resources available to address hunger. Climate change causes droughts and floods, leading to fewer crops (World Food Programme).

Whatever the reasons for food shortages, one thing is sure: the children who suffer are not to blame. Hunger affects their intellectual development, physical growth, and the ability to fight off illness. More than 40 percent of children in India have stunted growth caused by malnutrition (Bread for the World). Without proper nutrition, a child's heart literally shrinks. The liver, kidneys, and intestines begin breaking down.

In a world where thousands starve to death every day, we are surrounded by plenty. One restaurant in New York kept track of leftover food on people's plates. In one year, they threw away 2½ tons of meat. The United States wastes 20 percent of its food. An estimated \$31 billion a year in food is thrown away or destroyed because of surplus. Americans waste enough food in a year to feed

over 50 million people.

James Reston was a columnist for The New York Times for 30 years. In his final column, he wrote, "In America, we have learned something about how to deal with adversity, but not much about how to deal with prosperity. We are very rich, but we are not having a very good time. We are producing so much food that we do not know what to do with the garbage, while half of the human race goes to bed hungry every night."

Americans are 5% of the world's population, but consume 20-25% of the world's resources. Americans have learned to make excuses: "I work hard for what I have." "The government should do more." "I have too much to worry about without thinking about starving children." "It's not my responsibility."

You might think liberal churches would latch on to the issue of hunger, but most do not. When we talk about racism, anti-Semitism, immigration, human trafficking, or LGBTQIA issues, liberals know we are not the bad guys, but when we talk about hunger, we are part of the problem. You might think conservative churches that say they take the Bible literally would take the 3000 verses on sharing with the poor literally. If worship themes were in proportion to the attention given in Scripture, churches would have several world hunger months each year.

One of the few things left and right-wing Christianity agrees on is that our churches are not going to worry too much about hungry children. Church leaders have figured out that feeding hungry children on the other side of the world will not increase attendance.

Our lack of concern is embarrassing. According to one study, most Americans who call themselves Christians give

less than a dollar a year to feed the hungry. We lose sleep over problems at work, difficulties at school, and troubles at home, but few of us lose sleep over children starving. We tell ourselves there is nothing we can do about it, but that is not true.

One ethicist offers this parable: “Imagine you are on your way to work at a new job. For your first day, you have bought new clothes to make a good impression on your boss and co-workers. On the way to work, you come across a child drowning in a pond. If you stop to help, you will not only be late to work, but will ruin your new clothes. That said, there is no question about the right course of action. You have to stop and help.”

You have to ask, “If we’re obligated to do the right thing when it comes to the children we see, what about those we don’t see?”

Are we obligated to care for children in India? At some point in our lives, we come to grips with the haunting idea that we could have been born a poor child ourselves. We were not born in poverty, so what are our obligations to those who were?

We cannot solve the problem of hunger, but we can do more than we usually admit. We could start small. Peter Singer suggests giving 1% of our income to reduce the burdens of the hungry, increasing it over time. Not many do that, but it seems possible, doesn’t it?

We have the resources to end world hunger. The problem is distribution. We already produce enough grain to supply 3600 calories a day to every person. If Americans just substituted chicken for 1/3 of our beef consumption and the cattle-producers responded appropriately, it could provide enough grain to feed 100 million people.



We understand that hunger is a political issue. Christians who vote, who make their voices heard, make a difference. We can push our politicians to use foreign aid to dig water wells, build fish ponds, improve agriculture, teach nutrition, and make sure there is help when disasters hit.

We make a difference when we refuse to be comfortable with the tragedy of hunger. We make a difference when we do not pretend nothing can be done. We will make a difference when we give to this offering.

Heifer International is helping starving families in Odisha, India. The project increases each family's average flock from eight to 80 birds, which means farmers generate an annual income of \$228 by the third year.

The struggle against hunger is not fought in one cataclysmic battle. Hunger is defeated by a health clinic here, a new piece of legislation there, and chickens to a family in India. There is a lot of work to be done, and a lot of help we can give.

Imagine a tourist going to India, where he sees a hungry little girl outside a bakery window. She has fallen asleep with her face pressed against the window that separates her from the fresh bread inside. He takes a picture of the scene and posts it along with a lot of other photos on Facebook.

One person writes, "What did you do?"

The tourist is not sure what he means, "About what?"

"About the little girl asleep at the bakery window, what did you do about that?"

What will we do about hungry children?

What if someone surprised you by asking, "What was worship about this morning?"

You say, "It was about world hunger."

What if they then asked, "What did you do about it?"

During this hymn, we will do something about it. We will come to the table and give our offerings to help feed hungry people. We will make a difference. When we give significant gifts to feed the hungry, some, who would have died without those gifts, will live.

*sermon © Brett Younger*