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Description automatically generated**Sermon Transcript: David Williams, Bishop of Basingstoke**

**Week 2: Fair Shares - 2 Corinthians 8:10-15**

May I speak in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Paul's letter to the Corinthians gives us an astonishing picture of the different communities of the early church. The people in Macedonia, one of the poorest church communities in the New Testament era, has astounded people by their generosity. They've given actually what many people thought was beyond their ability to give. They compromise their own well-being for the sake of the church in Jerusalem that was suffering dire starvation.

Other churches, the church in Antioch, that not only prayed and fasted but equipped, Paul and Barnabas to plant the first church in Europe, in Philippi.

And now Paul is writing to the Corinthian church, which is an astonishing community; creative, wealthy, and within the church, perhaps not unsurprisingly, there are astonishing gifts being exercised. Orators are speaking speeches of compelling nature about the Christian faith. Spiritual gifts seem to be in abundance. Everything you could imagine is going on in the Corinthian church. And Paul then asks them, not only to excel in the gifts that they've been given, but to excel in their giving, and if you've been listening to the daily podcasts, you will have seen that progression through this last month. That challenge to give out of grace, out of a gift and understanding of who God is. It’s powerful stuff. It's inspiring stuff. It says, you know, you can't outgive God. God, who became poor for our sakes, that we might become rich.

And for many of us, we have begun, I hope to glimpse that to live a life of gratitude is a response to what God has given to us, and it leads to us giving of ourselves, our time, our money, our possessions. Not as some duty, but simply because we've got caught up in a cycle of grace and giving.

But then in these verses of 2 Corinthians 8, Paul shifts gear. He becomes very practical for a moment.

It's a well-crafted stewardship document. It speaks, actually, into that there are places of deep need that we need to respond to, and then a brief note:

If you've got plenty, you ought to be giving plenty.

Paul never refers to tithing in his teaching as that was an Old Testament concept, but I suspect he is asking us to go beyond proportional giving. So, give, if you like, until it begins to cost us something to give.

And so, he points to the needs of the other churches, and says to Corinth, you know there is a mutuality about this. We belong to one another; we enter into each other's mission and ministry by what we give and how we give.

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Description automatically generatedAs I was preparing this David Ford had written in the church times,

challenging the church that we ought to forget about deploying our clergy

based on what people can afford to underwrite the cost of those clergy and,

instead, to be much more radical. Deploy your clergy, based on need for the

ministry, rather than the ability of a local community to pay.

Well, it is a bit more complicated than that, is not it; we live as a community of communities in a diocese. There's a matrix of seeking to provide ministry leadership, pastoral care as well as responding to tough mission opportunities. But I believe that picture of the early church 2000 years ago, is deeply relevant to the 21st century. It's about us, belonging to one another, and the title we gave this sermon was fair shares for all actually at the end, that was what Paul was saying. There's an issue of equity about this. In our own diocese and in many of the Diocese around the country. There are new priorities about reaching communities that are not traditionally part of the church, and increasingly in the 21st century, it's younger people in urban areas. And so, it's my hope and prayer that as we grapple with 2 Corinthians, we enter not only the life of a church 2000 years ago, but we see that astonishing journey where God's word starts to speak to us here and now. We would see Jesus more clearly; we would see his astonishing self-giving of himself to us, but then would we see our response, as we enter into that truth becomes really well in the picture of the Macedonian church, an eye-watering generosity.

You can't outgive God. Martin Luther spoke of three conversions. He said, your heart needs to be converted because when you experience the love of God, the overwhelming love of God for you, that transforms everything. Your second conversion is the conversion of the mind; when you start to think Christianly about the world we live in and the community that gathers in the name of God.

And thirdly, he says your purse or your wallet, needs converting. And if your purse your wallet is not converted, has your heart or your mind been converted at all?

In a much more contemporary way, Billy Graham talked of this conversion. He said your chequebook is your theological document; look at your bank statement, see where your money is spent, does that reflect the priorities you have glimpsed in the Kingdom of God? I think in 2021 it is the list of your digital payees that will begin to give you a glimpse of how much you have begun this journey of grace and generosity.

Shall we pray:

Lord, for a heart that is softened by the love of God for a mind that is renewed, an understanding of who you are and what you call us to.

And for the gift of my own financial resources into the life of the church and the community. I pray for that transformation too.

In the Name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.