

OT Reading: Micah 7:1-7

NT Reading and Sermon Text: 2 Corinthians 8:1-9

I want to assure you up front that this morning's exhortation will NOT follow in the vein of so many false preachers today, who preach that by "enough faith" you can obligate God to give you earthly prosperity – this false gospel has been called the "prosperity gospel," and it is to be avoided. But in another way, I hope you will also see by the end just how much prosperity is contained in the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

As indicated by the title, there are two parts to my exhortation this morning – the first having to do with gleanings, the second to do with firstfruits.

In our Reading of the Law this morning we heard the law of God tell us, "When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. And you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard. You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the Lord your God."¹

I am convinced this law is a moral law we are still obliged to obey (unlike the ceremonial/sacrificial and civil laws).² It may be a law that very few people have an opportunity to break in today's society, but I believe there is also an underlying principle that speaks to the heart. When this law is given, it is the first command among many other moral laws: You shall not steal, you shall not deal falsely, you shall not lie, you shall not profane the name of God; you shall not oppress your neighbor; you shall not rob your neighbor; you shall do no injustice in court, etc... All summarized in the final verse of the section, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD"³

So if this law of the harvest is a moral law that we ourselves – not just the ancient Israelites – are obliged to obey, what does it mean? What does it mean for the landowner, and for the poor, to leave the gleanings, and to glean?

Gleaning is not a custom limited to the Old Testament, nor exclusively in ancient times to the Israelites. It has been practiced for thousands of years by many different

¹ Leviticus 19:9

² Francis Turretin disagrees, and believes the gleaning to be a civil (judicial) imperative that applies specifically to the nation of Israel, not a moral one. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1994), 2: 165. Even if Turretin is correct, those judicial laws still cannot be ignored. The WCF (19.4) states, "To them [the people of Israel] also, as a body politic, He gave sundry judicial laws, which expired together with the State of that people; not obliging any other now, **further than the general equity thereof may require**" [emphasis added]. The "general equity" might also be defined as our obligation to understand and obey the underlying principle of the law.

³ Leviticus 19:9-17

civilizations, but less so in an industrialized agricultural society.⁴ It was the practice of the poor to enter the landowner's field after the harvest and reap what was left over by the paid laborers. It was the fruit that had fallen to the ground, had been rejected, or looked over. What was left behind was called "the gleanings." The Levitical law formalizes the obligation to leave these gleanings, and not to frustrate this practice.

Many of you know I grew up in the Central San Joaquin Valley of California, and we had an orange grove. It was our job as children to make sure the trees were watered, to remove the weeds, to prune the branches, repair irrigation leaks and clean irrigation filters. One of the most exciting times – as children – was not the harvest itself, but after the harvest. After the harvest, my three brothers and I would go out into the orchard and have Orange Fights, in which we would don our makeshift shields and gather up oranges left on the ground and throw them at each other. Think of a snowball fight, but with oranges. And if we were feeling sinister, we would look for the oranges that were starting to rot, with blue mold. These oranges had the best impact and were the most feared because when they hit their target an explosion of acrid, rotting orange fumes would engulf you. It was enough to make you sick. These oranges that the harvesters left behind were the gleanings of our orchard.

The command to leave the gleanings was not just a charitable act for the poor, it was also a good business decision. Paid laborers were skilled at swathing fields of grain with a sickle or scythe. They could skillfully and efficiently prioritize and cut the clusters of grapes according to their worth. They were an efficient means of production, and could harvest many times faster than an unskilled laborer without tools, who had to pick by hand.

For a landowner to pay his skilled laborer to go back out to the field to harvest the gleanings, if he were paying by the hour, it would have cost more to pay the laborer than the yield was worth; and if he were paying by the value of the yield, the laborer would likely not waste his time with that task, when he could get much more from a different landowner in less time. The command to leave the gleanings (including the edges of the field), was as much a warning to stingy landowners who would even go so far as to waste money just to make sure the poor did not get what they did not work for.

⁴ Stephen Hussey argues that rather the decline of formalized gleaning was not at the outset of the Industrial Revolution, but after World War II. There were even then formal civil laws to entitle the poor to the gleanings of the harvest. Stephen Hussey, "The Last Survivor of an Ancient Race: The Changing Face of Essex Gleaning," in *The Agricultural History Review*, 45 no. 1 (1997), 61-72. The landmark cases in England that began to formalize the destruction of gleaning laws was *Worlledge v. Manning* (1786) and *Steel v. Houghton* (1788), in which the House of Lords declared that foreigners had no claim to gleaning, and that gleaning was a privilege and not a right, despite existing precedent by acclaimed English jurists. See Henry Blackstone, *Reports and Cases* (London: Joseph Butterworth and Son, 1827) 1:53-60. These judicial abrogations of long-standing custom coincided with an industrialized agriculture, but were not necessarily the consequence of it. More likely, the Enlightenment view of property rights had more to do with influencing the House of Lords, which Lord Loughborough in the *Steel* case described as "absolute enjoyment." See Peter King, *Crime and Law in England, 1750-1840: Remaking Justice from the Margins*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 283

So the leftovers were left available for those, for whom it would be worth the effort in gathering. This does not mean the gleaners “worked the land” to realize their harvest. No, they had no part in the planting, the irrigation, the weeding, the caring of the field or the vineyard. They simply were able to take what was leftover. It cannot be said the fruit that gleaners gathered was available to them because of their labors. They had no right to boast of their yield, their harvest. It was not their work that produced it. Rather, there was a shameful association with being a gleaner.⁵ Gleaners got the remnants, the leftovers, the stubble, the stuff on the ground. They did not get the harvest.

Amanda will confirm that it is extremely rare I eat oranges anymore. Having grown up with immediate access to fresh-off-the-tree oranges, I grew accustomed to the taste of fresh oranges. Here on the east coast, the oranges have been off the tree for at least several days by the time they reach the grocer, and I can tell. On these oranges, I can start to smell that same acrid, sickly-sweet odor, and it just reminds me of being pelted by my brothers with the moldy, rotting oranges in my childhood. Most of us know the satisfaction and joy of eating fruit or vegetables directly from the source. I had grown so accustomed to the first-ripe fruit, the “gleanings” had become abhorrent to me.

“Woe is me!” cries Micah, “for I am like the gleaner, who gets the small grapes leftover on the ground. I don’t get the clusters of grapes. I don’t get the first-ripe fig that my soul desires.”⁶

But while these gleanings were the rejected fruit, they were not a punishment for the poor either. No, it was by all means a **grace** to the poor. Just as the manna of heaven was a grace to the Israelites in the wilderness,⁷ so the gleanings of the harvest were a grace to the impoverished. The fruit was not as bad as it could possibly be. Judges 8:2 asks, “Is not the gleaning of the grapes of Ephraim better than the grape harvest of Abiezer?” But by definition, gleanings were not the best of the landowner’s harvest either.

So we come now to the text. The grace that Paul is talking about is an earthly grace. It is the physical relief of the saints, made possible by the labors of the Macedonians. Paul is urging the Corinthian church to participate in “the relief of the saints” as the Macedonian church did.⁸ The Macedonians did not just leave the gleanings for the poor to gather, either. They gave from the harvest. They gave “beyond their means, of their own accord.”⁹ So important to the Macedonians was the immediate need to relieve the saints.

⁵ In the Book of Ruth, Boaz commands his laborers, not to rebuke, or **put to shame** (מִלְּקָם, kalam), the gleaner Ruth after inviting her to gather among the sheaves.

⁶ In the Septuagint, Micah 7:1 uses the word, ἐπιφυλλίδα (epiphyllida), which is a word that specifically refers to the little grapes that fall to the ground and are rejected by the reapers.

⁷ The same verb used in Ruth, “to glean,” (לָקַט, laqat) is used in Exodus to record the gathering of manna.

⁸ 2 Corinthians 8:4. “διακονίας τῆς εἰς τοὺς ἁγίους” could also be translated “service unto the saints”

⁹ 2 Corinthians 8:3.

Don't get me wrong, Paul is not exhorting the practice of living beyond your means generally as a virtue.¹⁰ But does the fellowship of the saints, their needs and relief, mean so much to you that you would give of your own harvest, rather than simply what has been leftover in the gleanings?

The Macedonians budgeted their tithes, they gave to Lord first, and then by the will of God to Paul and Titus. This was an unplanned expense. Perhaps they had to dip into their savings accounts or sell some stock or even real property. Maybe they sold an heirloom. In whatever case, their motives for giving – their love for the saints – was proven in their giving even beyond their means – from the fruits meant to be sold at market, not simply from the gleanings.

Paul recognized among the Corinthians a sort of competitive spirit in their faith.¹¹ This was a church that excelled in speech, in knowledge, in earnestness, in love, and even in faith. They could likely teach a systematic theology course, filled with rich doctrine and with expert, compelling presentation. But Paul is urging them to excel in the grace of giving to the relief of the saints, as well.

As an example, Paul points to Christ. “Though Christ was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.”¹² We know that Paul is not promising earthly wealth in exchange for lip service to Christ. Paul is not promising the Corinthians, if you sow a seed gift in faith of \$1,000, God is obligated to bless you with \$1,000,000. No, that is the so-called “Prosperity Gospel,” and it is a damnable heresy, that has caused more suffering of the saints than it ever has relieved them.

No, we know Paul is speaking of a different prosperity. The prosperity of salvific grace. The prosperity that our sins are forgiven, our moral debts our relieved, our rebellion against God absolved. The prosperity of entering the kingdom of God! Amidst a world of sin, Micah is comforted: “But as for me, I will look to the LORD; I will wait for the God of my salvation; my God will hear me.”¹³

But do we understand just how valuable this prosperity of salvation is?

¹⁰ Cf. Romans 13:8, “Owe no one anything”

¹¹ The exhortation to give continues in 2 Corinthians 9, and Paul here again appeals to their competitive spirit (vv 1-5): Now it is superfluous for me to write to you about the ministry for the saints, for I know your readiness, of which I boast about you to the people of Macedonia, saying that Achaia has been ready since last year. And your zeal has stirred up most of them. But I am sending the brothers so that our boasting about you may not prove empty in this matter, so that you may be ready, as I said you would be. Otherwise, if some Macedonians come with me and find that you are not ready, we would be humiliated—to say nothing of you—for being so confident. So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to go on ahead to you and arrange in advance for the gift you have promised, so that it may be ready as a willing gift, not as an exaction.

¹² 2 Corinthians 8:9

¹³ Micah 7:7

Paul elsewhere in his letters, to the Philippians, tells us that though God, Christ did not stay only God. God emptied himself, lowered himself, humbled himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. God became a human servant, and he humbled himself further by becoming obedient to the law, even unto the point of death, even death on a cross.¹⁴

That cross was because of us AND FOR us! Our sins nailed there with him, and the righteousness of Christ flowing out unto us, so that WE, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present us holy and blameless and above reproach before him.¹⁵

The poverty of Christ is our prosperity. Just as the greek word used in Philippians for the humbling of Christ has connotations of impoverishment and abasement,¹⁶ the word used in Corinthians to describe the impoverishing of Christ is the same root word used in Greek to describe the gleanings available to the poor.¹⁷ Jesus Christ, the only begotten son of God, the firstfruit,¹⁸ the firstborn among many.¹⁹ Jesus is not just the firstfruit. Jesus is the consummate firstfruit. The firstfruit among the firstfruit among the firstfruit, emptied himself to become a gleaner.

We remember in the book of Ruth after Boaz had met Ruth the poor gleaner. “A full reward be given you by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge. Come here and eat some bread, and dip your morsel into the wine.” So she ate of this bread and wine until she was satisfied, and had some left over. When she left to resume her gleaning of the leftovers, Boaz the landowner instructed his laborers, “Let Ruth glean even from among the sheaves – the firstfruits – and do not reproach her. And also pull out some of the firstfruit harvest for her and leave it for her to gather, and do not rebuke her.”²⁰

¹⁴ Philippians 2:5-8

¹⁵ Colossians 1:21-22

¹⁶ Ταπεινῶ (tapeino): “to cause someone to lose prestige or status, humble, humiliate, abase” (BDAG)

¹⁷ The word “glean” is not used in the New Testament, though we do see the disciples gleaning heads of grain in Matthew 12/Mark 2/Luke 6 on the Sabbath. But the word used in the Septuagint to describe the gleanings in the Levitical laws is αποπίπτοντα (ἀποπίπτοντα), which is to say, “that which has fallen away.” The prefix apo- is to signify its distance from the source, but more interestingly, its root (πίπτω, having been fallen) is a perfect (grammatical sense) verbal construct of the “πτω” section of the Greek vocabulary, which, like the Hebrew usage, signifies fallenness, calamity, destitution. Therein lies:

- πτώω – to spit out (John 9:6)
- πτώμα – a calamity, a dead body, a fallen body (Matthew 24:28)
- πτώσις – state or condition of falling (Matthew 7:27)
- πτωχεύω – state of being in poverty, fallen to destitution (2 Cor 8:9)

¹⁸ For the firstborn as a firstfruit, see Genesis 49:3, Abraham calls Reuben the “firstfruits of my strength”. Also See Psalm 78:51 and Psalm 105:36. Israel is likewise called “the firstfruit of LORD’s harvest” (Jeremiah 2:3). See also 1 Corinthians 15:20, “Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.”

¹⁹ Romans 8:29

²⁰ Ruth 2:12-16

Boaz is an example of how to relieve the saints. He, like the Macedonians, gave of his firstfruits to relieve the impoverished Ruth. He proved his love by giving more than the gleanings, the leftovers, the “not worth it” fruit. He gave some of the best stuff he had.

But though Boaz is often referred to as a type of Christ, he is not THE Christ. Though Boaz is an example, he is not the CONSUMMATE example.

Christ did not give us SOME OF the best stuff for us to glean from. Christ gave us the best stuff there could possibly be! Jesus Christ, the firstfruit of firstfruits, gave us himself, emptied himself, humbled himself for we impoverished and hopeless souls, so that we may feed on him, so that we may take the bread and dip it into the wine until we are satisfied, and have some left over.

Jesus told his followers, “do not work for the food that perishes – (that is to say, “lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and thieves break through and steal”)²¹ – but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. The bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” His followers said to him, as if they could partake of this bread independently of him, “Sir, give us this bread always,” to which Jesus replies, “I AM THE BREAD OF LIFE; whoever comes to ME shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.”²²

Jesus Christ is also called the firstfruit of the resurrection, that firstfruit offering of bread raised from the threshing floor unto heaven.²³ And though in Adam we were promised death, in this firstfruit of the resurrection we are promised our own bodily resurrection when Christ returns, and every earthly, sinful authority will be destroyed, and death will be destroyed forever.²⁴

Take this firstfruit of firstfruits, unto the promise of eternal life. Jesus showed himself as the firstfruit to be gleaned by we poor impoverished souls over and over and over again, but most dramatically in the last supper. As they were eating, Jesus took bread and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples and said, “Take, eat; this is my body, broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” And he did the same with the wine cup – the fruit of the grape vine – after supper saying, “this cup of wine that is poured out – **emptied** – for you is the new covenant in my blood. As often as you drink, do in remembrance of me.”²⁵ Let the firstfruit of the harvest in this bread and wine serve as a

²¹ Matthew 6:19-20

²² John 6:27-35

²³ Cf. Numbers 15:21. Paul uses the same noun, ἀπαρχήν (aparché) in 1 Corinthians 15:20 as the Septuagint (LXX) uses in Numbers 15:21 to describe the firstfruit offering of bread

²⁴ 1 Corinthians 15:20-49

²⁵ Matthew 26:26-28 , 1 Corinthians 11:24-25

reminder what I have done for you²⁶ – broken for you, poured out for you, condescended, fallen from on high **for you to glean.**

>>**We cannot overvalue the sacrifice given for us. There is no market rate for the body and blood of Christ. And as a result of his death, we are the inheritors of eternal life. We miserable, wretched, despondent creatures who go through life skulking on the edges of the field, shamefully picking up the leftovers in our daily economy and struggle for identity and reputation, the rotting grain and grapes on the ground, for our temporal satisfaction, only to be dissatisfied the very next day; we creatures such as these, O Church, have been called into the landowner's house, saved from impoverishment and fallenness, like Ruth, to enjoy all that he owns, and to be his bride forever. And like the gleaners we are, we enjoy the harvest because of the landowner's labor, not our own.²⁷ We love Christ because he first loved us.²⁸<<**

Christ is not just the consummate firstfruit, he is the consummate landowner. He has shown us better than Boaz how to treat the gleaner, better than the Macedonians how to relieve the saints. Christ gave of himself for others far more than we could possibly imitate; but that does not mean we cannot strive to imitate Christ.

It is not for me to give practical examples here how we as a church, or you individually, can go beyond leaving the gleanings for the poor. There are some modern examples about “gleaning” that I’m actually not particularly fond of, especially regarding money. For the most part, I think it’s safest to think of gleaning (at least as it pertains as a moral law) in strictly an agricultural context. But in **principle** the most important thing is that your heart is inclined toward Christlike charity. We don’t give of ourselves and our property only to those that “deserve it.” We don’t give of ourselves and our property expecting anything in return. We don’t give of ourselves and our property pridefully, expecting the recipient to publicly acknowledge our greatness. We don’t grumble and consciously give the worst of ourselves and our property and say, “that’s enough.”

If we remember what has been given us in our wretched state; if we remember our relationship with God; if we strive to imitate Christ and give glory to God in all that we do, our hearts should give cheerfully and humbly of the best of ourselves and our property, expecting nothing in return, and to love one another as Christ has loved us.²⁹ Christ became impoverished for our eternal prosperity; how can we not empty and humble ourselves for the relief of our brothers and sisters in Christ?

²⁶ The author of Hebrews (10:3) uses the same Greek word, ἀνάμνησις (anamnēsis) to discuss a reminder about sacrifices. This word is only elsewhere used in Luke and 1 Corinthians, which lends to the thesis that Paul is the author of Hebrews.

²⁷ Ephesians 2:8-10

²⁸ 1 John 4:19

²⁹ 2 Corinthians 9:6-7; Luke 6:35; John 13:34; John 15:12