

## **“A Fair Balance”**

Rev. Dr. Peter Bynum

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*7Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking. 8I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. 9For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. 10And in this matter I am giving my advice: it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something— 11now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means. 12For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have. 13I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between 14your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. 15As it is written, “The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little.”*

*(2 Corinthians 8:7-15)*

The Post-Impressionist French painter Henri Matisse is often quoted as saying, “What I dream of is an art of balance.” While his colors were bold, he sought to stabilize his works with a balance between warm and cold patches of color.<sup>1</sup> As he sketched out a canvas, his hope was to create something that could soothe and calm his viewers – or to use his words, “something like a good armchair, which provides relaxation from physical fatigue.”<sup>2</sup>

The artists of ancient Greece had similar goals. As the playwright Euripides once wrote, “The best and safest thing is to keep a balance in your life, [acknowledging] the great powers around us and in us. If you can do that, and live that way, you are really a wise man.”<sup>3</sup>

Personally, my primary source for this important life lesson came from one of the greatest and most underrated philosophers of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: Mr. Miyagi from the Karate Kid movies. He asks his martial arts student Daniel LaRusso. “Do you remember the lesson about balance? It is not just for karate. It is a lesson for the whole of life. If your whole life is in balance, everything will be better.”

As is true for most enduring wisdom, the value of balance has strong roots in the Bible. The familiar words of Ecclesiastes 3 come to mind. “For everything there is a season; [there is] a time for every matter under heaven.” In every human life there are times to plant, and times to harvest... times to be on the offensive, and times to be on the defensive... times to weep, and times to laugh... times to mourn and times... times for speaking, and times to remain silent. Life in God’s world is a balance of all kinds of actions and experiences.

All of this comes into view in Paul’s writing to the church in Corinth. He is urging the people of the church to restore a certain kind of balance in their lives. Something in the church was out of kilter. Specifically, the church in Jerusalem was falling deeper and deeper

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<sup>1</sup> “Henri Matisse,” <https://www.theartstory.org>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://libquotes.com/henri-matisse/quote/lbk8b5a>

<sup>3</sup> Tom Prideaux, “A Cry from the Past for Artistic Conscience,” Life Magazine, April 4, 1969.



into crippling poverty. According to the book of Acts, the original vision for the church was for all the believers to hold “all things in common,” for each to share everything they had with others, so that all needs could be met.<sup>4</sup> That was not working out. For one thing, in Jerusalem, the converts to Christianity tended to come from the poorer classes, which meant that the pot to be shared by everyone was small. This trend was being aggravated by the persecution that the church was enduring, with many of the best worker and providers being jailed on account of their faith.

Meanwhile, the missionary churches in the west were taking root among much more diverse and prosperous groups. Concerned about this growing imbalance, Paul began to actively press the churches in Macedonia and Achaia to take up collections to support the Christians of Jerusalem. *“It is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need,”* Paul wrote to the Corinthians.

It is important to note here that Paul always saw this as a two-way street. The western churches might be richer in material things, but it seems they were poor in other ways. It reminds me of times when I have traveled with churches to places like Trinidad and Tobago, and the Dominican Republic. We have gone there to serve, but traveling home on the plane we had a much different view of who had really done the serving. I think of some of the meals I had on those trips – meals served in houses with dirt floors under corrugated tin roofs, in villages struggling under the weight of desperate poverty. But when it came time to feed us, the food just kept coming and coming.

I remember in particular one hot day, when we were exhausted from a morning in the sun, and at lunch a few families fed us and gave us these amazing juices -- mango, papaya, pineapple, and passion fruit juices were generously poured for us, glass after glass. It was the most refreshing, thirst-quenching treat I could imagine. I learned later that the concentrate they had used was a rare treat, an extravagance they never would have showered upon themselves. Even so, they joyfully made sure that our cups were overflowing. And they gave it all to us with such joy, without a second thought to the cost. The strength, purity, and totality of their joy was something that we, amidst all of our wealth and blessings, experience so rarely.

This is why Paul never talked about the people of Jerusalem as “poor people.” He always called them “saints.” And he knew that, if the western churches could bring themselves to share what they had with those saints in the east, then some of the riches of the faithful in Jerusalem would also filter back into the lives of the Christians in Corinth, Philippi, and Ephesus. “It’s a question of balance,” Paul said to the church. It is not just about your wealth and their poverty. It is also about *their* wealth and *your* poverty. You have something they need, and they have something you need. So what we really need is each other. What we really need is a fair balance.

This wisdom that Paul was sharing with his churches remains true for us and our church. One of the things we talk about a lot here at Larchmont Avenue Church is “connection.” As individuals and as a congregation, we seek greater connection – with God, with one another, and with our community. And if what we desire is connection, then we must also strive for balance.

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<sup>4</sup> Acts 2:44.

Any farmer will tell you that, if you want your garden to produce strong plants that flower beautifully and bear good fruit, it is critical that the soil be balanced.<sup>5</sup> Healthy ratios of organic matter, calcium, magnesium, potassium, a good pH balance -- farmers work intentionally to cultivate a balance of all of these elements in the soil, because that work creates the best possible conditions for growth, productivity, and higher yields year after year. Nurture the soil, nourish the crops.<sup>6</sup>

That is the way Paul saw the offering for Jerusalem. He saw it as a way to cultivate the soil of the church and restore balance to the various communities within the church. Yes, it was a way to help people in need, but Paul knew that those who gave to the offering would be receiving some very precious things in return. The purpose was clear: nurture the soil, nourish the crops. Seek the right balance, and the church will thrive.

The opposite is also true. When the balance is off, things begin to falter and fail. I once heard about a lawsuit that came out of a rural area in old England. A baker had become convinced that the farmer who sold him butter had been cheating him, so he took him to court. "When I first started buying butter from that dairy farmer," the baker testified, "a pound was a pound. But week after week, the amount of butter I received seemed to get smaller and smaller, even though he charged me for a full pound every time."

When the judge asked the dairy farmer to respond to the charges, the farmer rose in his own defense. "Your honor," he said, "My scales are perfectly balanced. Whenever the baker bought butter from me, I would put his one-pound loaf of bread on one side of the scale, and then place my butter on the other side until they were level. That is how I knew when he had his pound of butter."<sup>7</sup>

With that, the judge dismissed the case. The baker had self-righteously accused the farmer of deception, but all the while he himself had been misrepresenting the weight of his own contribution, what he was bringing to the table. I expect what happened was that, when the baker began to wonder if he was being cheated, he began to hold back on what he offered, and the loaves of bread he offered to others became gradually smaller. That, in turn, caused the man selling butter to be distrustful, as well, and the connection between them became increasingly strained. The bottom line is, when we are out of balance, when our lives are skewed and out of kilter, the bonds that bind us together weaken, and fray, and ultimately tear.

The Bible makes it clear: in the kingdom of God, we are like seeds in God's garden. When our lives are balanced and healthy, we are like trees planted by streams of water; we are as strong as the cedars of Lebanon; we are a thriving vineyard bearing good fruit; we are God's pleasant planting. But when we lose our balance, and things get skewed, we quickly fall into disrepair, with weeds, thorns, and thistles overtaking the good growth. Nurture the soil, nourish the crops. Balance our priorities, and our spirits will soar.

That is why, just as Henri Matisse dreamt of an art of balance, the apostle Paul dreamt of a faith in balance, a people in balance, a church in balance, and a world in balance. And he believed, as I believe, that the greatest opportunity for us to find that kind of healthy equilibrium is right here in the church. Standing hand in hand in mutual faith promotes balance. Generosity to a common cause promotes balance. Our public commitment to

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.farmersweekly.co.za/opinion/by-invitation/whats-in-a-handful-of-soil/>

<sup>6</sup> "Soil Health: Set the Stage for Balanced Crop Nutrition," <https://www.cropnutrition.com>, June 29, 2024.

<sup>7</sup> "Balanced Scale?" <https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermon-illustrations/72914/balanced-scale-by-sermon-central>

shared spiritual goals promotes balance. It's really pretty simple, Paul says, when we get right down to it. All of it comes down to a fair balance -- a balance between our present abundance and the needs of the world, so that the ones who have much do not have too much, and the ones who have little do not have too little.

As a great philosopher once said, this lesson on balance is "not just for karate. It is a lesson for the whole of life. If our life is in balance, everything will be better." ***Amen.***