

GIVING GUIDELINES

1 Corinthians 16:1–4

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1 Corinthians 16:1–4 (NIV)

“Now about the collection for God’s people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do. On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made. Then, when I arrive, I will give letters of introduction to the men you approve and send them with your gift to Jerusalem. If it seems advisable for me to go also, they will accompany me.”

The Corinthians had written Paul a list of questions. He begins to answer those questions in chapter 7 when he says, “Now concerning the matter about which you wrote.” Chapter 7 deals with matters about marriage, divorce, and the single life. Another matter which they wrote him about, he deals with in chapter 8. That is, eating food which is sacrificed first to idols. Then, in chapter 12, he writes about spiritual gifts and questions which they have raised. In chapter 15, he writes about problems in the Corinthian church that had bothered them regarding the resurrection of the body. They’d also evidently asked him a question about the offering for the saints that was being collected. So these four verses—as well as an expanded treatment in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9—address the matter of the offering for the saints.

I want to share with you, for a few moments today, that how we look at this offering, twenty centuries later, may be different from how we would have seen it had we been a member of the church at the time. It seems so wonderful, looking back, that there was an offering for the Jerusalem saints. It seems like such a gallant thing. Such an ideal expression of love. I’ve done a lot of thinking about this Corinthian offering request and this offering for the Jerusalem saints

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over the years, and studied appropriate passages in Acts and 2 Corinthians that pertain to it. I've come up with some conclusions that, had I been a member of the church at Corinth when this request had been received, I would have had conflicting emotions about the appeal for the offering.

One side of me would initially begin to respond more on a negative side. Another side would gradually respond more on a positive side. There were pros and cons associated with the taking of this offering.

I. Let me share with you some of the matters that might have troubled me initially when I heard about the offering.

First thing I might have said is, "I don't know these people." The offering is for saints in Jerusalem. And Jerusalem is far, far away from Corinth, separated by at least a month's journey, possibly more. I can't call up these people and talk to them. I'm separated from them. Why should I send funds to help somebody halfway around the world?

The thing that would have bothered me more greatly would have been the fact that I'm being asked to send an offering to people who initially weren't so sure they wanted me in the body of Christ, and some of them still aren't so sure they want me in the body of Christ. The Corinthian Christians were, by and large, Gentile Christians. And the Lord had told these Jerusalem saints right at the beginning, "Go to Jerusalem, Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the world" (Acts 1:8) and they had refused to go. They were comfortable in Jerusalem and Judea. It was only through persecution that the church began to scatter into Samaria and the uttermost parts of the world. They didn't do it of their free will. They went through persecution and the message of the gospel began spreading to the uttermost parts of the world. Then the Jerusalem church wasn't quite sure they wanted to receive into membership these Gentiles and they had a big debate as to

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whether or not we should have been admitted. “No, Paul’s asking me for a financial offering to help these people that hadn’t been sure they wanted me in their club.”

I might say, “Wait a minute! It’s time we teach these saints a lesson.’ I probably could have also safely said, “There are people in need in our own congregation and our own city of Corinth. Why do we need to be helping Jerusalem? Let them help themselves.”

Furthermore, I might have said that, by stressing my responsibility, the apostle appears to be neglecting an emphasis on God’s supplying the needs. If the Jerusalem saint are truly in need, God knows it and He’s able to supply their need, why turn to me? Why turn to the Corinthian church?

And a fifth response I might have had—to top it all off, the apostle is sending persons to assist in the collection. In 2 Corinthians 8, we find that he’s sending Titus. He is sending another brother which is esteemed in the churches, which is probably Luke. Then he’s sending another brother that he doesn’t identify and simply calls him, “one who has often proved himself in many ways to be zealous.” I wonder if Paul may have a memory lapse and couldn’t remember the brother’s name. Three persons are coming. Paul, what’s going on here?

II. As I began to listen to this purpose for the offering, there are some other factors that I think I would consider that would have made me eventually want to participate.

One is simply a confidence in the leadership of the apostle and his co-workers. This offering evidently is a priority that God had placed on Paul’s heart. He was in a position in the body of Christ to see more than my limited stance at Corinth could see. He could see a wider range of need and where the body of Christ ought to participate. I’d also have to say to myself that Paul had never given me occasion to question his motives. And Paul would have never asked for

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himself. There would have been kind of a personal confidence in him when he said there was a need.

There would also be a growing realization that the needs in our own body don't need to go unmet while we're meeting this need; both needs can be met simultaneously.

I also could begin to know that this offering could be a positive witness to the world. Paul, in fact, says this in 2 Corinthians 9, what a wonderful thing this is going to be in the eyes of so many. A positive witness to the world.

I was talking to somebody this last week. They had come to Christ. They had been living in a very worldly kind of context. Their comment on why they were motivated to come to Christ was out there—it is a very cruel world, everybody that they had come in contact with was evidently in it for themselves. They were commenting about coming to Christ and experiencing the warmth of God's people. It was a fantastic thing, therefore, in the ancient world to know that Gentile Christians who had been rejected by Jewish believers had gotten over that and were showing their unity in the world by how much they loved one another. What a positive witness to the world.

I would also be comforted by the fact that this offering would meet a very definite need in the body of Christ. If I had thought about it long enough, I too believe I could have come to the conviction that the information that Paul had given was accurate. And by the way, there's almost a year's worth of information that's transmitted. Before this Corinthian letter is even sent, the offering is underway. Then a number of months, up to a year later, he sends 2 Corinthians as a follow-up. So they've been regularly aware, all this time, of the offering of the saints.

Information regarding the offering has given all a chance to participate.

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I have found that, in the body of Christ, there are really two ways that God uses for people to meet a need.

A. One is by what you might call “direct revelation.” There is a need, a person doesn’t share that need with anyone. They simply pray for God to meet it and God does. A request is never made. George Müller was such a person—the founder of an orphanage in England. He literally prayed in, over the course of his lifetime, millions of dollars in food and supplies to feed the thousands of orphans that he cared for over his lifetime. He never sent out a newsletter. He never appealed for funds. He just simply prayed and it came in. That’s a beautiful pattern and I believe there was a special operation of the gift of faith in George Müller’s life that made that possible.

Notice, however, in this offering, Paul does make that approach. He doesn’t counsel the Jerusalem saints, “Simply begin praying for the Lord to supply the need.” He makes information available to the entire body, so that they participate in helping that need. This brings us to the second pattern, which is just as legitimate to use.

B. The body of Christ itself is informed and made aware of the need and asked to pray about it and asked to participate in it. There are many people who, without George Müller’s gift of faith, saw what he did and began to reach the conclusion that you never ought to tell anyone about the needs. That it was somehow wrong to state a need. So, therefore, I know of situations in which people went out as faith missionaries to Africa and India and China, in effect, saying, “We won’t tell anybody about our needs and God will supply.” But somehow they didn’t have the same measure of faith or the same gift of faith in operation, and within months, they were coming back home and quitting. They had to learn that, for God to supply their need, they needed to communicate that information.

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What is done in respect to an offering depends upon the way God may be operative in that situation or that person. The George Müller pattern isn't a universal pattern. God respects different approaches in this area. I'd have to say that, even though Paul would've appealed to me, he had not violated the concern to simply stay and pray that it'd come in. He also informed the body about it.

Offering needs change, but the principles about all offerings remain the same. Paul says, "Now concerning the collection for God's people..." No matter what the issues are, there are some principles that remain constant. Paul talks about the principle of universality. For example, "Do what I told the Galatian churches to do." In other words, the Corinthians aren't being asked to do something others have not been asked to do.

So when we're asked to be involved in an offering, it's not that we're asked to do something others haven't done. We're simply participating in what others are doing and have done before us, and will do if the Lord carries after us. Acts 20:4 tells us that the people who took the offering to Jerusalem were from the churches that were founded in all the missionary journeys. The first missionary journey: in Galatia; the second missionary journey: in Greece; and the third missionary journey: in Ephesus, in Asia. All the churches had been asked to participate. It had been a universal experience.

I think of what we have today and the kinds of commitment of people in the past to make what we've enjoyed possible. It's really phenomenal to consider. I think of a statement Elton Trueblood made. He said, "A man has made at least a start in discovering the meaning of human life when he plants shade trees under which he knows full well he will never sit."

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When I look at the kind of commitment that I'm being called upon to make, I say, "There's something special about it for me," but on the other hand, I'm not the first person who's done that and I won't be the last.

Another thing I think is a universal principle is systematic or regular giving. Paul says, "On the first day of every week" (1 Corinthians 16:2). Here's the first and earliest indication in the New Testament, that the early Christians met on Sunday for their worship. Worship flows out of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And giving flows out of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Galatians were taught, "Give systematically on the day that you meet."

The other principle that doesn't vary is the principle of the involvement of every member. He said, "Each one of you," every member involvement. Including the young and the old and the rich and the poor. I found that, one of my primary responsibilities as a parent was to help my children begin to understand that it's important to tithe, to give their offerings to the work of the Lord, to make a commitment. If they can be faithful with a dollar, then if God ever gives them a million dollars, they can be faithful with that as well. The young and the old, the rich and the poor, every age and status.

One of the older persons in the church, some time ago, gave me a little note about their involvement in the life of this church in finances that said something like this, "As I get older and my income dwindles, I look forward more to offering the little I can."

In giving, I've found that sometimes the Lord will lay something on my heart. Other times, He simply says to me, "What's on your heart to do?" And he says "It's ok with me, whatever's there."

The fourth principle is the principle of a predetermined objective. Setting aside a sum of money in keeping with the income, saving it up. The person in the ancient world generally got paid

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every day. So every day they'd lay some up, Paul was saying, "Predetermine what you're going to do."

In fact, what he really asked them for was a faith promise. In 2 Corinthians 8, he makes reference to the fact, in verses 10–12, that some of them made a faith promise and it was evidently beyond their capacity, so they're beginning to wonder, "Should I give anything at all?" And they feel badly about it. He finally says to them, "If the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable, according to what one has, not according to what one does not have." He says, "Give what you have and don't worry about it." The principle of a predetermined objective.

Do any of you remember Basement Churches? I almost can't think of any Basement Church that God built on top. Maybe there were. It probably took years to do it. But there's something about the idealism of a group of people who said, "We're going to start building and we're going to start with the basement. We'll dig a hole in the ground and we'll pray and believe. And without counting the cost of the total project, we'll at least get into the basement." Sure enough, they got in the basement and stayed there for years. It's hard to come out of the basement.

Jesus taught us, and this is what we're attempting to do, to count the cost. No one building a tower should begin building, unless he's first counted the cost.

We find that, as individuals, we make commitments in life. I make a commitment when I buy a house, a car, a refrigerator. We felt that this principle of commitment was also important.

There is a fifth principle, the principle of proportionate giving. Paul specifically says in 2 Corinthians 8 that the Macedonians gave. And he urges the same thing from the Corinthians—not equal gifts, but equal sacrifice. Paul, in fact, knows that the Macedonians, the northern Grecian believers, gave not only what they were able, but beyond what they were able. In fact, he said that they had extreme poverty but they didn't say, "Don't talk to us about the saints in

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Jerusalem! We have needs ourselves.” They gave out of their extreme poverty (2 Corinthians 8:2).

I discovered why they gave. Paul says it in 2 Corinthians 8:1 “Because of the grace of God.”

Paul didn’t say, “We’re going to have a contest between the church in Corinth and the churches in Macedonia. There’s going to be a thermometer in each church, and we’re going to see which one gets to the top first.” They were not giving because of a contest. Not because of the IRS—that it would be extremely helpful to them if they gave. Not because somebody was on an ego trip or under a guilt trip—they had to give in order to please God. No, it was simply the grace of God. All of life is an offering of grace to God. Saying to God, “Thanks.”

If giving doesn’t proceed from grace, then it amounts to legalism and bondage and egotism and those kinds of things. So God wants us to give proportionally, but out of a sense of grace.

The sixth principle I want to share is the principle of responsible administration. Paul indicates to the Corinthian church that there are men who are approved and he’s sending them with the gift to Jerusalem. He probably would join them, which we know later he did. In other words, when we give a gift, we should feel a certain sense that the purpose toward which it is given is going to be realized. There is a sense of accountability. There are so many ministries in vogue among Christians today, some of which have no accountability at all. And which are nothing more than family controlled outfits that pad the pocket of the people that are involved. I’m ashamed to say that, but we know it’s the truth. What is called upon is a sort of “open book” in financing. We feel that, as stewards of God, we have accountability, not only to God but to the people. Paul felt this same thing as well when he talked about other trustworthy people that are involved in the administration of the funds.

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Then Paul also gives us the principle of pressure-free giving. He says to them in verse 2, “So that when I come, no collections will be made.” I have a thesis as to why Paul said that. That is, Paul had such a powerful personality that he would rather inform and inspire them by letter, so that simply his coming would not be such that they would give unseasonably. They might just give too much. And they might feel too much pressure from his tremendous personality. Even though he wouldn’t intend it, they might feel that way. So he has simply informed them and motivated them through his letter. But he says, “When I come, no collections will be made.” The principle of pressure-free giving.

Each ministry has a responsibility for insuring that that takes place. Paul says, in 2 Corinthians, that each one is not to give under compulsion, but liberally, for the Lord. He says, “God loves a generous giver,” and the word is *hilaros*—a “hilarious giver” (2 Corinthians 9:7).

More important to us than financial commitments are you, our people, God’s people, whom we love and care for. The most important gift we can ever give to Christ is not out of our wallet, it’s out of our heart. I believe that, ultimately, what we give in the long range of our Christian experience will reflect the status of our heart. But in the sense the greatest gift we could ever give to Jesus Christ is our heart. The greatest gift God has ever given us is not something physical or tangible. It is Jesus Christ—the greatest gift. Jesus didn’t leave splinters from the cross with us. He didn’t leave His robes. He didn’t leave money in the bank. But He left himself. The greatest gift is himself to us, ourselves to Him.

What was the greatest gift my mother ever gave me? It wasn’t something financial, although she did that. I once asked my mother, the last year, before she died, “I’d like to know if you’ve ever missed a day praying for me in my whole life.” She kind of skewed her eyes and said, “I don’t think so. Long ago, over the course of time, there might have been two or three things—

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something might have happened—but I believe I have prayed for you every day of your life.”

The greatest gift I could ever have—a loving mother, a praying mother, a mother who gave her life.

I think the greatest thing we could ever give Christ is our life and our heart. The greatest thing we could ever give one another in the body of Christ is our love and our heart. I want that to happen with us.

Closing Prayer

Thank You, Lord, for these moments we’ve shared again today. Each of us can think of generous people in our lives who have given to us. Who have given, not only out of material things, but who have given even out of their very lives—moms, dads, sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, family, friends, teachers, saints in the body. Thank You for the gifts we’ve received.

Lord, the most important thing we could ever give to You is our own life. Yet today there is a part of us that is restricted from ever being given to You. Open our hearts so that all of us might be given to You. Save us, O Lord, from holding back part of our life from You. All of us, all for Jesus. Within our church family these days, give us a new sense of liberty and love for each other, for You and Your work. We deeply believe, Lord, that You’ve called us to do certain things. And we deeply believe that You’ll make that possible. But among the most beautiful things that You’ve called us to do is to show love for one another in this world. Where people are so frequently unloving, unthoughtful, unkind—You’ve called us to take a towel and wipe one another’s feet, to love one another with tears and kisses, to care, to really show love. May it ever be. If we had our choice between being rich in money and in rich love—God, make us rich in love. We ask this in Your name. Amen.