

## **GIVING GUIDELINES**

### **Dr. George O. Wood**

We return to the Corinthian letter today and next Sunday I trust to finish the Corinthian letter after over a year experience in it.

“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 where he says “Now concerning the matters 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 that is sacrificed first to idols. Then in chapter 12 he writes about spiritual gifts and questions they have raised. 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 in 1 Corinthians 16 as well as the expanded treatment of the subject in 2 Corinthians 8 & 9 addresses the matter of the offering for the saints.

I want to share with you for a few moments today the fact that how we look at this offering twenty centuries later may be different that how we would have seen it had we been a member of the Corinthian church at the time. It seems wonderful now in 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, offering for the Jerusalem saints over the years. Studied appropriate passages in Acts and in 2 Corinthians that pertain to it. I’ve come up with some conclusions. Had I been a member of the church of Corinthian when this request had been received I would have had conflicting emotions about the appeal for the offering.

One side of me would have initially begun to respond more on a negative side. Then another side of me would gradually respond on a positive side. There were pros and cons associated with the taking of this offering. Let me share with you some of the matters which might have troubled me initially when I heard about the offering.

First thing I might have said is these are people I don’t know. The offering is for “saints in Jerusalem”. Jerusalem is far, far away from Corinthian 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 half way around the world from me.

The thing that would have bothered me more greatly would have been the fact that I’m being asked 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

## GIVING GUIDELINES

go into Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria and the uttermost parts of the world and they 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 part of the world. They didn't do it out of free will. They went through persecution and the message of the gospel began spreading in the uttermost parts of the world. Then the Jerusalem church wasn't quite sure that they wanted to receive into membership these gentiles. They had a big debate as to whether or not we should have been admitted.

Now Paul's asking me for a financial offering to help these people who hadn't been sure they wanted me in their club. I might say, "Wait a minute. Perhaps it's time we teach these saints a lesson."

I also probably could have safely said "There are people in need in our own congregation and our own city of Corinthian. Why do we need to be helping Jerusalem for. Let them help themselves."

I might have said that by stressing my responsibility the apostle appears to be neglecting an emphasis upon God supplying a need. If the Jerusalem saints truly need it God knows and he's able to supply the need. Why turn to me? Why turn to the Corinthian church?

A fifth response I might have had is to top it all off the apostle is sending persons to assist in the collection. 2 Corinthians 8 we find that he's sending Titus, another brother who is esteemed in the churches which is probably Luke, then he's sending another brother that he doesn't identify at all. He just simply calls him, "one who often proved himself in many ways to be zealous." I wonder if Paul at that point didn't have a memory lapse and couldn't remember the brother's name he was sending. Three persons are coming.

As I began to listen to this purpose for the offering. There were some other factors though I think I would consider that would have made me want to eventually to have participated.

One is simply a confidence in the leadership of the apostle and his co-workers. This offering evidently was a priority that God had placed upon Paul's heart. He was in a position in the body of Christ to see more than my limited stance at Corinthian could see. He could see a wider range of need and see where the body of Christ ought to participate in it.

I'd also have to say to myself that Paul had never given me occasion to question his motives. Also, knowing Paul, know that he would have never asked for himself so there would be also kind of a personal confidence in him when he said there was a need.

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

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

It was a fantastic thing in the ancient world to now 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!

## GIVING GUIDELINES

I would also have been comforted by the fact that this offering would meet a very definite need in the body of Christ.

And if I had thought about it long enough I do believe I would have come to the conviction that the information Paul has given and there's almost a year's period of information that's transmitted. Before this Corinthian letter is ever sent this offering is underway. A number of months up to a year later he sends them 2 Corinthians as a follow up so they had been regularly aware all this time of the offering for the saints.

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

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

One is what you might call by direct revelation. There is a need, the person doesn't share that need with anyone, they simply pray for God to meet it and God does. Not a request is ever made.

George Mueller was such a person, he founder of an orphanage in Bristol and I believe also in London. He prayed in over the course of his lifetime literally millions of dollars in food and supplies to feed the thousands of orphans that over his lifetime he cared for. He never sent out a newsletter. Never appealed for funds. Just simply prayed and it came in. That's a beautiful pattern and I believe operative in George Mueller's life was a special operation of the gift of faith that made that possible.

But notice however in this offering Paul doesn't use that approach. He doesn't counsel the Jerusalem saints to simply begin praying the Lord to supply the need. Rather he begins to make information available to the entire body that they should participate in helping that need.

Which brings us to the second pattern which is just as legitimate to use. That is that 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 Mueller's gift of faith saw what he did and began to adopt the conclusion that you ought never to tell anyone about a need. That it was somehow wrong to say the need. Therefore I know of situations from church history where missionaries went to Africa and to India and China, went out as faith missionaries in effect saying, We won't tell anybody about our need and God will supply. But somehow they didn't have the same measure of faith or the same gift of faith in operation. Within months they were coming back home and they were quitting. They had to learn that in order for God to supply their need they needed to communicate that information.

So what is done in respect to an offering depends upon the particular way that God may be operative in that situation or that person. That the George Mueller pattern is not a universal pattern. That God respects different approaches in this area. So I would have to say that even though Paul had appealed to me he had not violated the concern to simply stay and pray that it would come in. He also informed the body about it.

The offering needs change. But the principles remain the same about all offerings. Paul says, "Now concerning the collection for God's people." I see our collection in the Together We

## GIVING GUIDELINES

Build campaign the same way. It's a collection for God's people. We're preparing if Jesus carries for the church tomorrow. We're concerned about the young people. We're concerned about the families. We're concerned about the single adults. We're concerned about this community we're going to minister to. We're concerned about people who are not yet Christians but are going to be. So we have a collection for God's people. It's as simple as that. It's not a building fund. It's a collection for God's people.

Then he talks about the principle of universality. "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. How are churches funded? How are buildings built? How does the work of missions go on? Because all of us at one time or another participate in it. So when we're asked to be involved in an offering it's not that we're being asked to do something others haven't done. We're simply participating in what others are doing, and have done before us, and if the Lord carries will do 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 in Galatia, the second in Greece and the third in Ephesus in Asia. All the churches had been asked to participate. It had been a universal experience.

A statement Elton Trueblood made "A man has made at least a start in discovering the meaning of life when he plants shade trees under which he knows full well he will never sit."

Another thing I think that's a universal principle is systematic or regular giving. It says "On the first day of every week." Here's the first and earliest indication that the first 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 early Christians were taught to give systematically on the day you meet.

The third principle that doesn't vary is the principle of every member involvement. He said "each one of you" – every member involvement. Including the young and the old, the rich and the poor. I found that one of my primary responsibilities, one of my important responsibilities as a parent is to help my children begin to understand – if they can be faithful with a dollar then if God ever gives them a million dollars they could be faithful with that as well.

As I get older and my income dwindles I look forward more to offering the little I can. I have found that sometimes the Lord lays something on my heart. Other times he simply says to me, What's on your heart to do?

The fourth principle is the principle of a pre determined objective. Setting aside a sum of money in keeping with his income. Saving it up. The person in the ancient world generally got paid every day. So every day they should save some up, Paul was saying. 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 had 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. So he finally says to them, if the willingness is there the gift is acceptable according to what one has not according to what he does not have. He finally says give what you have and don't worry about it. The principle of a predetermined objective.

## GIVING GUIDELINES

As an officer of this church I have the responsibility of signing contracts long with others on the board. When we sign, we commit to it. We ask in this offering that you join us in this commitment so that our name isn't standing out for something the people themselves do not represent and are not for.

Do any of you remember basement churches? I can't hardly think of any basement church that got 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 that 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 we'll believe but without counting the cost of the total project we'll at least get into the basement. Sure enough they got into the basement and stayed there for years. It's hard to come out of the basement.

Jesus taught us, it's what we're attempting to do. Jesus taught us to count the cost. "No one building a tower should begin building until he's first counted the cost. As individuals we make commitments in life. I make a commitment when I buy a house. I make a commitment when I buy a car. I make a commitment when I buy a refrigerator. This principle of commitment is also important as we come to a time of offering.

There's a fifth principle. It's the principle of proportionate giving. Paul specifically says in 2 Corinthians 8 the Macedonians gave and he encourages the same thing for the Corinthians. Not equal gifts but equal sacrifice.

The northern Grecian believers gave not only what they were able but beyond what they were able. In fact he said they had extreme poverty but they did not say, Don't talk to us about the saints in Jerusalem. We have needs ourselves. He said they gave out of their extreme poverty. I've discovered why they gave. Paul says it in 2 Corinthians 8:1. Because of the grace of God. The grace of God!

Paul didn't say We're going to have a contest between the church at Corinth and the churches in Macedonia. There's going to be a thermometer in each church and we'll see which one gets to the top first. No giving because of a contest. No giving because the IRS would be extremely helpful to them if they gave. No giving because somebody was on an ego trip or a guilt trip that they had to give in order to please God. Not it was simply the grace of God. All of life is an offering of grace to God, saying to God, Thanks. If giving does proceed from grace then it amounts to legalism and works and bondage and egoism and those kinds of things.

God wants us to give proportionally but out of a sense of grace.

The sixth principle I want to share is responsible administration. Paul indicates to the Corinthian church there are men who are approved. He's sending them with a gift to Jerusalem and he probably would join them as well which we know later he did. In other words when we give a gift we should feel a sort of sense that the purpose towards 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 you know it's the truth and I know it's the truth. What's called upon is open books in finances. I want you to know that these books of this church is open to anybody at anytime. We feel as stewards of God we have an accountability not only to God but to the people. And Paul

## GIVING GUIDELINES

felt this same thing as well when he talked about “Other trustworthy people that are involved in the administration of the fund.”

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 why Paul said that. Paul had such a powerful personality he would rather inform and inspire them by letter rather than simply his coming might be such they would give insensibly. They might give too much. They might feel too much pressure from his tremendous personality. Even though he didn’t intend it they might feel that way. So he has simply informed them and motivated them through his letters but he said, when I come no collections will be made. The principle of pressure free giving. Each ministry has responsibility of assuring that that takes place.

Paul says in 2 Corinthians that each one is not to give under compulsion but to give liberally for the Lord. He says, God loves the generous giver (or the cheerful giver) and the word is hilarious. A hilarious giver.

I want to share with you some words that were shared with me that were some of the most freeing words I’ve ever heard in my life. I want to set everybody in the congregation at ease with this.

In 1973 when we were considering the merger here in Costa Mesa with the church in Newport Beach the whole negotiation that had been entered into was coming to a culmination the first week in July. I had, months before, accepted a commitment to speak at Bible camp up in the mountains about an hour and a half from here. The week I needed to be here was the week I’d committed to be there. I was trying to reconcile how I could keep both commitments. I was the early morning speaker at the camp but I know when you’re invited to be the guest speaker somewhere they really depend upon you to be there for the whole camp. It’s important for you to flavor the whole camp, to be spiritually in tune with what’s going on, to be available to counsel people, pray with them, to be a part of what’s involved. I’d made that commitment. I thought, I’ve got to ask the director of the camp for permission to speak in the morning, immediately turn around and drive back and then come up the next morning.

So I drove up that first morning, that first Monday in July of 1973 realizing I needed to be here during the daytime but I’d also committed to be there. I don’t like to welsh out of agreements and covenants. I got to the camp, got out of the car, and the director was just about the first person I saw. She extended her greeting, glad to see me. I said, “I’ve got a request to make of you.” I explained the situation that I needed to be here but I also needed to be there. I laid this matter before her. I said trusting that she would find it possible for me to return everyday but if she didn’t I’d understand. I’d receive it cheerfully if she felt I actually needed to live with that commitment I had made with her, I would receive that joyfully and gladly and would stay there. It was simply up to her but I laid it at her feet.

She looked at me, put an arm on my shoulder and looked me straight in the eye and said some of the words that have been the greatest words I’ve heard in my life. She looked at me and said, “George, you’re free.” I knew instantly the minute she said it that I was. I was free to go, free to stay. Anything was ok with her. I was free. I’d never had anyone to say that to me before. I’ve had occasion to say that to a lot of people since then.

## GIVING GUIDELINES

In regard to the whole Together We Build campaign, you're free. If God puts it on your heart to make a commitment, you're free. If you don't feel like you can be a part, you're free. More important to us than financial commitments are you, our people – God's people. Gifts we could 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 reflects the status of our heart. But in a sense the greatest gift we could ever give is our heart to Jesus Christ. The greatest gift God has ever given to us is not something physical or tangible in that sense. 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 us himself. The greatest gift is ourself to him, himself to us.

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.

Thank you, Lord, for these moments we 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 have given even out of their very lives. The most important thing we could ever give is our own life to you. If today there's a part of us that's restricted from being given to you, open our heart. 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 gives us a new sense of liberty and love for each other, for you and for your work. We deeply believe that you will make that possible but among the most beautiful things you've called us to do is to show love for one another in this world. People are so frequently unloving, unthoughtful, unkind. You've called us to take a towel and to wipe one another's feet. To love one another with tears and kisses. To care. To really show love. If we had our choice of being rich in money or rich in love, God make us rich in love. We ask this in your name. Amen.