

GIVING GUIDELINES
The Christian and Money
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We return to the Corinthian letter today for our sermon. We left off with the resurrection. We're at the culmination of our Together We Build effort. I think therefore the Lord has put us in the right scripture at the right time.

“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 pertaining with 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 the resurrection of the body. They'd also evidently asked him a question about an offering for the saints that was being collected. So these four verses in 1 Corinthians 16 as well as the expanded treatment of this 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 20 centuries later may be different than 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 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 have initially begin to respond more on the negative side. Then another side of me would have gradually begun to 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 that might have troubled me initially when I had heard about the offering.

First thing that I might have said was these are people I don't know. The offering is for saints in Jerusalem. Jerusalem is far, far away from Corinth separated by at least a month's journey and 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?

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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. 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. The Lord had told these Jerusalem saints right at the beginning, Go into Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria and the uttermost parts of the world. 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 part of the world. They didn't do it of their own 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 unto membership these Gentiles. They had a big debate whether or not we should be admitted.

Now Paul's asking me or a financial offering to help these people who hadn't been sure they wanted me in their club.

I might say, 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 in our own city of Corinth what do we need to be helping Jerusalem for? Let them help themselves.

Furthermore I might have said that by stressing my responsibility the apostle might have been neglecting an emphasis on God's supplying the need. If the Jerusalem saints 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?

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

As I began to listen for this purpose for the offering there were some other factors to consider that would have made me to eventually wanted to participate.

One is simply a confidence in the leadership of the apostle and his co-workers. This 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 Corinth could see. He could see a wider range of need and see where the body of Christ ought to participate in it.

I also might have to say to myself that Paul has never given me reason to question his motives. And also knowing Paul, know that he would never have asked for himself. There would have been kind of a personal confidence in him when he said there was a need.

There would also have been the 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

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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.

I would also be comforted that this offering would meet a very definite need in the body of Christ. 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 by the way there's almost a year's period of information that's transmitted before this Corinthian letter is ever sent, the offering is underway. A number of months, up to a year later, he sends 2 Corinthians as a follow up. So they have been made regularly aware all this time of the offering for the saints. Information regarding the offerings has given all a chance to participate.

I've found that in the body of Christ there are two ways that God uses for people to meet a need. One is 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. A request is never made. George Mueller was such a person, the founder of an orphanage in Bristol and I believe 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. Never sent out a newsletter. Never an appeal for funds. Just simply prayed and it came in. It's a beautiful pattern. I believe in George Mueller's life was a special operation of the gift of faith that made that possible.

But notice in this offering Paul doesn't use that approach. He doesn't counsel the Jerusalem saints to simply begin praying for 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 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 state a need. Therefore I know of situations from church history where missionaries went to Africa and India and China, went out as faith missionaries in effect we won't tell anybody about our needs and God will supply. 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 they were quitting and they had to learn that in order for God to supply their need they needed to communicate that information.

What it does in respect to an offering depends on the particular way God may be operative in that situation or that person. The George Mueller pattern is not a universal pattern. God respects different approaches in this area. I'd have to say that even though Paul had appealed to me he had not violated the concern to just 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 for the Together We Build campaign the same way. It's a collection for God's people. It's as simple as that. It's not building fund. It's collection for God's people.

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There are principles no matter what the issue is that remain constant. Paul talks about the principle of universality. “Do what I told the Galatian churches to do,” he says. In other words the Corinthians aren’t being asked to do something that others have not been asked to do.

How are churches funded, how are buildings built, how does the work of missions go on. 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’ve being asked to do something others haven’t done. We’re implying 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 people from churches that were founded in all the missionary journeys. The first missionary to Galatian, the second missionary journey in Greece and the third missionary journey in Ephesus and Asia. All the churches are asked to participate. It’s a universal experience.

When I think of what we have today and the kind of commitment it took for people in the past to make possible what we enjoy it’s phenomenal to consider.

Elton Trueblood said, “A man has made at least a start at discovering the meaning of life when he plants shade trees under which he knows full well he will never set.”

When I look at the kind of commitment 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 that’s done that and I won’t be the last.

Another thing I think is a universal principle of this is the principle of systematic or regular giving. Paul says “On the first day of every week.” 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 early Christians were taught give systematically on the day that you meet.

The third principle that doesn’t vary is the principle of every member involvement. He says “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 that it’s important to tithe, to give their offerings to the work of the Lord, to make commitments. 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 of the church some time ago gave me a little note: “As I get older and my income dwindles, I look forward more to offering the little I can.”

In giving I have found that sometimes the Lord lays something on my heart. And sometimes he says to me, What’s on your heart to do? 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 his income saving it up. The person in the ancient world generally got paid every day. Every day they would lay some up. Predetermine what you’re going to do. In fact, what he really asked them for is 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

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capacity so they're beginning to wonder, Should I give anything at all. And they feel badly about it.

He finally says, "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.

Anyone remember basement churches? I can't hardly think of any basement church that got built on top. It probably took years to do it. There's something about the idealism of a group of people that said, We're going to start building and we'll start with the basement. We'll dig a hole in the ground. We'll pray and believe. Without counting the cost 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 to count the cost. "No one building a tower should be building it unless he's first counted the cost."

We find as individuals that 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 is a fifth principle: the principle of proportionate giving.

Paul specifically says in 2 Corinthians 8 that the Macedonians gave. He encourages the same thing from the Corinthians – not equal gifts but equal sacrifice. Paul in effect notes that the Macedonians, the Northern Grecian believers gave not only what they were able but beyond what they were able. They had extreme poverty. They gave out of their extreme poverty. I discovered why they gave. 2 Corinthians 8:1 "Because of the grace of God." Paul didn't have a contest between the churches in Corinth and the church in Macedonia and there's going to be a thermometer in each church and we're going to 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. Not under a guilt trip that they had to give in order to please God. It was simply the grace of God. All of life is simply an offering of grace to God. It's saying thanks. If giving doesn't proceed from grace then it amounts to legalism and works and bondage and egotism and those kind 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 there are men who are approved. The 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.

What is called upon is a sort of open book in finances. The books of this church are open to anybody at any time. 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 in verse 2 “So that when I come no collection will be made.” I have a thesis as to why Paul said that. That is Paul had such a powerful personality he would rather inform and inspire them by letter rather than simply his coming might be such that they would give insensibly. They might give too much. They might feel too much pressure from his tremendous personality. Even though he wouldn’t intend it they might feel that way. He is simply informed them and motivated them through his letter but he says when I come no collection will be made. The principle of pressure free giving.

Each ministry has the responsibility of insuring that that takes place.

Paul says in 2 Corinthians that each one is not to give under compulsion but to give liberally for he says remember the Lord loves a generous giver or a cheerful giver. The word is hilarious – a hilarious giver.

I want to share with you some of the most freeing words I’ve ever heard in my life. I want to set everyone 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 of July. I had months before accepted a commitment to speak at a Bible camp in the mountains about an hour and a half from here. The week that I needed to be here was the week I 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 the guest speaker somewhere they really depend on you to be there for the whole camp. I thought I’ve got to ask the director of the camp for permission to speak in the morning and immediately turn around and drive back and come up the next morning. I drove up that first Monday morning realizing I needed to be here during the daytime but I’d also committed to be there. I don’t like to welch out of agreements. I got to the camp. The director was about the first person I saw. I met her when I got out of the car. She extended her greeting, glad to see me. I said, “I’ve got a request to make of you.” I explained the situation. I needed to be here but I had also made an agreement to be there. I laid this matter before her trusting that she would find it possible to let me return every day. But if she didn’t I would understand. I would receive it cheerfully if she felt I needed to live with the commitment I had made with her. I’d receive it joyfully and gladly. It was up to her. I laid it at her feet. She looked at me, put an arm on my shoulder and she looked me straight in the eye and said some of the greatest words I’ve heard in my life “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’ve never had anyone say that to me before. I’ve had occasion to say that to a lot of people since then. You’re free.

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 are people, God’s people whom we love and care for.

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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 a sense, the greatest gift we can 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 himself to us, ourselves to him.

A year tomorrow my mom went to be with the Lord. She was the most givingest person I've ever known. She didn't have much to give. She was just a giver. When she died there wasn't much left to distribute. I got to thinking, What was the greatest gift mother ever gave me? It wasn't something financial although she did that. I once asked my mother "I'd like to know if you've ever missed a day praying for me my whole life." She kind of skewed her eyes and said, "I don't think so. Long ago there may have been two or three times 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 gift we could ever give one another in the body of Christ is our love and our heart. I want that to happen with us.

Thank you Lord for these moments we've shared again today. Each of us can think of generous people in our lives who've 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, 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 is our own life to you. If today there is a part of us that is restricted from being given to you. Open our hearts 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 for your work. We deeply believe Lord that you've called us to do certain things. We deeply believe that you will make that possible. But among the most beautiful things that you have 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 rich in love God, make us rich in love. We ask this in your name. Amen.