



How to Give

1 Corinthians 16:1-4

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Chapter Fifteen was the end of the “heavy content” in St. Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, but there are still a few things left in Chapter Sixteen. At the end of the letter Paul gives his personal greetings and some specific instructions to the Corinthians. He’s done with the “theology”, but he’s not done with the practical. We might be tempted to skip this part of the letter, but remember that the Spirit inspired Paul to write it for a reason. The specific situations might have come and gone two thousand years ago, but they still teach us something – and, in fact, what we find here in these final instructions is no less important than the “deep theology” of Chapter 15. This morning I want to look at the first four verses. This first part of Chapter 16 tells us something about how to give. The rest of the chapter, which we’ll get into next week, tells us how to live and then how to live with each other.

So the first of those three things: *how to give*. Last Sunday we saw Paul waxing eloquent on the glories of the resurrection – telling us about the Last Trump and how we’ll all be raised with Christ and changed in the twinkling of an eye. And now on the other side of the chapter break he says, “Now concerning the collection...” He goes directly from the great theme of the resurrection straight to money. The resurrection and money might seem worlds apart, but Paul understood that there’s a connection. Remember that his final point about the resurrection was that *because of our hope in the resurrection* we should be “steadfast, immovable, *always abounding in the work of the Lord.*” Brothers and sisters, here’s the work and how we abound in it. Look at verses 1 to 4:

Now concerning the collection for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do. On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come. And when I arrive, I will send those whom you accredit by letter to carry your gift to Jerusalem. If it seems advisable that I should go also, they will accompany me. (1 Corinthians 16:1-4)

What Paul is talking about is a collection for their brothers and sister who were in need in Jerusalem. This was St. Paul’s pet project and we see him at four different times in his epistles urging all the gentile churches to participate. The book of Acts tells us that in this time two things happened in Judea. The first was a series of famines that left the people destitute and hungry. The second was a serious persecution of the Christians there by the Jews. And so the rest of the Church throughout the empire banded together to take care of their brothers and sisters who were not only experiencing famine, but persecution on top of it. Paul seems to have been the one who organised the effort and here as he encourages the Corinthians to give, he gives *us* some important principles that should govern *our* giving. The *first* is that for Christians giving is universal. Look again at verse 1:

...as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do.

He wasn’t just asking the Corinthians to do this. Paul was teaching all the churches that one of the most important parts of the Christian life is to give. Jesus said, “Freely you have received, freely give” (Matthew 10:8 NKJV). Friend, if God has given you nothing, then this isn’t for you – you can keep what you have. If God hasn’t moved in your life, the Church doesn’t need your money. *But*, if God has worked in your life, giving you new life, consider that your new life is never something you could have purchased with any amount of money. God has given you the *gift* of the Spirit, of forgiveness of sins, of healing – all things that he has given you *without charge*. “*Freely you have received, freely give.*”

Now these churches Paul urged to give weren’t rich. In fact some of them were almost as poor as the Christians in Jerusalem, and yet we see them almost falling over each other in an effort to out-give each other. Giving *is* for rich people – but if you are in Christ, you *are* rich. Even if we only look at it in terms of money and possessions, even the poorest of us in Canada are amazingly wealthy in comparison to the people in Paul’s churches. They didn’t question whether or not they could give. They didn’t give grudgingly. They heard of a church in need and out of their poverty they gave abundantly. Giving is the essence of our faith as we live it out.

Look at verse 2:

On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it

up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come.

Again, notice he says, “each of you.” Again, giving is a fundamental act of faith – it’s an act of worship. No one is exempt. Parents, start teaching your kids early. Remind them that God has freely given to them and that they ought to free give back to him – even if it’s only a few pennies or a quarter or a dollar. The amount isn’t important – it’s the attitude of worship in the heart.

The *second* principle is that we give consistently and regularly. Paul says, “On the first day of every week...put something aside.” The first thing we need to do is to commit to giving back to God. Start with a tithe – that was the Old Testament minimum – and pledge it to God. Maybe you can pledge consistently to give God more, but pledge a *specific* amount or percentage. If you have extra one week or one month you can give more, but pledge a specific amount to him and then make a point of setting it aside. If you get paid weekly, set that money aside weekly, if monthly, set it aside monthly – but set it aside. Don’t wait until the end of the month when you’ve forgotten it and spent it on yourself.

It’s not without reason that Paul says to do this on the first day of the week – on Sunday. Sunday is the day on which we remember and celebrate the resurrection of Jesus and all that he has done for us through his death. He freely gave himself and we celebrate that and give thanks by giving back to him on that same day.

Now notice finally in verse 2 Paul says to store it up “so that there will be no collecting when I come.” In this specific instance Paul was urging them to set aside money not for their local church, but for their brothers and sisters in Jerusalem. He was planning to visit them and didn’t want to waste his time having to make a last minute emotional appeal to raise the money – and then end up with people trying to scrape a little bit together for him at the last minute. No, he’s urging them to set aside something *regularly* so that there will be a whole bunch ready for him when he gets there. But this principle applies equally to what we give to the church. The local church shouldn’t have to make an emotional appeal for money. Each of us ought to be setting something aside regularly – and bringing it regularly – instead of waiting and then only giving when there’s a desperate need. If we were all pledging to give a certain amount regularly, we’d never be in desperate need.

The *third* principle about giving is also in verse 2, in those words, “as he may prosper.”

The NIV says, “a sum of money in keeping with his income.” The principle is that we’re expected to give back to God according to how he has given to us. Has he blessed you abundantly? Then give abundantly. Is your income small – maybe you’re struggling financially? Then your gift will be smaller, but it should still be *something*. Again, God is less concerned with the amount than he is with the attitude with which it’s given. He wants our worship and worship is never given grudgingly or sparingly. Again, giving is a form of worship and you’d never consider holding back worship from God – holding it back for yourself. No. Think of the poor woman whom Jesus saw dropping her two pennies into the collection box. He told his disciples that those two pennies were worth far more to God than the large amounts given by the rich. God had given to her and her act of worship was to give abundantly from her meagre income. In contrast, the rich may have given a lot more, but their giving was often less than sacrificial. Friends, worship is about sacrifice – about giving ourselves and our resources to God. If it’s not a sacrifice, it’s not worship.

To be clear, this isn’t about a tithe. The tithe, which means ten per cent, was what God *required* the Israelites to offer from their income. Rich or poor, everyone gave ten percent. For a poor man that might be hard to do, but it could be very easy for someone who was rich. The Old Testament tithe is never made a requirement in the New Testament, because in Christ we no longer live legalistically.

The best way I can think to illustrate this is to take you back to the Sermon on the Mount. Remember that was where Jesus told the people that while the Law told them not to kill or not to commit adultery, the Christian life entailed more than just following the letter of the law. You might not kill your brother, but if you hated him, you were just as guilty. You might not commit a physical act of adultery, but if you looked at a woman lustfully, you were still guilty. Think of giving in those terms. The Jew could give his ten percent and claim he’d done his duty – that he’d been faithful. But for the Christian faith and duty to God are deeper than the raw letter of the Law. The Christian can never say, “Well, I gave my ten percent. I’ve fulfilled my obligation.” For the Christian, the tithe is only a *starting* point – the bare minimum.

The spiritual idea behind tithing was to remind the people that one hundred per cent of what they had ultimately came from God

and by giving back ten per cent, they were acknowledging that, first, it had come from him, and that, second, it all ultimately belonged to him. It was a reminder that as stewards of the gifts of God, we need to be willing to give some back to him instead of spending it all on ourselves. Too often we get the idea that ten per cent belongs to God and we can do whatever we want with the rest. If that’s our attitude, we’ve missed the point.

And so while the amount was legislated in the Old Testament, for the Christian the Law becomes only a starting point. If God has richly blessed you, then richly bless him. You might easily be able to give much more than ten percent. I’ve known some very wealthy people who have chosen to live (and still live well) on twenty or thirty per cent of their income so that they can give seventy or eighty back to God. Many of us in the middle class could easily give twenty or thirty per cent at times. It’s a matter of perspective and re-evaluating our priorities. The New Testament never teaches tithing. It teaches proportionate giving – something much greater than the tithe. God doesn’t give us wealth so that we can lavish it on ourselves, but that we can share it with those who are in need and to further the ministry of the Church. It always amazes me how much churches and ministries always seem to be struggling, and yet there’s no reason. If every Christian gave – even if it were *only* a ten per cent tithe – there would be no church or ministry in need.

If we are willing to set aside a portion of what God has given in order to give it back to him in faith he *will* respond. I have *never* heard anyone say that they wished they hadn’t given so much to God or that they had reason to regret their giving – even in cases when that giving was extremely sacrificial. Jesus said to seek first his kingdom, and that if we will commit to that, the Father will take care of our earthly needs. Giving is the most significant ways we can live out that kind of faith – and if you commit to living your faith in that way, I guarantee God will grow your faith in ways you’ve never imagined. If you know that your priorities aren’t where they should be, start giving – take a step in faith – and watch as God gives you a new perspective. Again, I guarantee that God will give you new perspectives and priorities. The earthly things you once thought were so important will begin to fade in significance and the things of the kingdom will become clearer and more important. I’ve been talking these last few weeks about living with an eternal perspective. That’s what giving is all about.

But let me give you a word of warning too. Once you have committed something to God, he’s not going to let you have it back. When Veronica and I were first married we pledged ten percent of our income to our church. We were faithful in setting that money aside each month, but one month we missed it. She thought I’d written a cheque. I thought she had. It never happened. I didn’t notice it until I was balancing the chequebook a couple months later. At that time the money was already gone. Since it was an accidental oversight and since it would be hard to come up with the money at that point, I decided that I wouldn’t worry about it. God gave me an almost audible reminder as I sat there that the money was his, but I ignored it.

Well, a couple of days later I was driving home from work and my engine started sputtering off and on all the way home. As I got to our street it died a couple of times. In the morning I just managed to get it to the shop to have it looked at. It turned out my fuel pump had failed. They fixed it and I didn’t think anything of it until a few weeks later when my bank statement came. You see, at the time we lived in Vancouver and I was working across the border in Bellingham. I was getting paid in US dollars. When I paid the bill at the shop, I used a US Dollar debit card. When I got that statement my eyes about popped out of my head. I had to grab a calculator just to be sure. When that repair bill, which was in Canadian Dollars was converted to US Dollars the amount was *exactly* ten percent of my income that month, right down to the penny. Now we usually rounded our giving up to the nearest \$50, so it wasn’t just a simple tithe, but the tithe is what we had pledged and that’s what God took back. There was just no way it was a coincidence. God even timed it right. He waited until I had found the error and made a choice not to correct it. It was God’s way of saying, “That was my money and I’m not going to let you keep it once you’ve pledged it to me.” Needless to say, we scraped up that money the next month and made sure that God got it back.

Now look at verses 3-4:

And when I arrive, I will send those whom you accredit by letter to carry your gift to Jerusalem. If it seems advisable that I should go also, they will accompany me.

This is principle *four*. What Paul’s saying is that the church needs to guarantee that the

men delivering this money to Jerusalem be trustworthy. Remember, they couldn't just write a cheque and drop it in the mail or make a credit card payment on the Internet. These men would be carrying a strongbox full of coins – real money – all the way from Greece to Jerusalem.

Paul's point is that we need to be responsible with our giving and make sure that what we give is really used for the work of the kingdom. In other letters Paul is careful to make sure that he doesn't have this responsibility himself. But what a difference that is from the people today who appeal to Christians for money and then squander it on themselves. Think of the televangelists who appeal for "seed money," promising healings and greater wealth in return if you'll only give sacrificially to them – but then they spend that money on multi-million dollar homes, luxury cars, and airplanes for themselves. Don't ever give money to a "minister" who appeals to your greed, because they're more than likely greedy themselves – and yet men and women like this bilk people of millions, maybe billions, of dollars. In many cases there are ministries who do good work, but who use the gifts given to them poorly and inefficiently, wasting it instead of putting it to good use in the kingdom. And then there are many others that may be careful with their money, but lead people astray with false teaching or that "help" people in need in such a way that they perpetuate the problem.

Just as the Paul urged the Corinthians to take care with their gift to the Jerusalem church, you and I need to take care that we aren't putting our gifts in the hands of con-artists, the irresponsible, or false teachers. The model we see in the New Testament is that ministries and missionaries working outside the local church were always under the authority of either the local church or a group of churches and that *all* those churches were under the authority of the apostles. That's drastically different from our world of independent and "parachurch" ministries today, who are accountable to no one.

In the apostolic church *all* the giving was done to and through the local church. Even this special collection that was being taken up for the relief of the brothers and sisters in Jerusalem was given through the local church and then sent on from there. You see, if Paul said the money was going to support the church in Jerusalem, you knew it was. He wasn't going to spend half of it on a personal yacht in order to sail across the

Mediterranean to get it there. He wasn't going to spend it on fancy hotels and expensive meals on the way there. And you knew that he wasn't going to be spreading false teaching when he got there.

Now we do live in a time when many good Christians have opted to operate ministries outside the authority of a church body. It's just something we have to deal with. And the fact is that many of them are very responsible and do a good job of what they do. But if we follow the principles and patterns in Scripture, it means that our *first* priority in giving needs to be the local church. In the Old Testament the tithe went to the support of the Temple and the priests and to the minister that went on there. The people were expected to care for the poor and needy above and beyond that. And that means that we each at least need to be tithing to the local church for its support and ministry. And as much as we as a congregation want to be involved in missions and outreach and helping those in need, we need to then give more to the local church in order to make that happen. If we do give to ministries outside the church, we need to do so with care. We need to look into their faithfulness, both to Scripture and to their finances.

I can't think of a better example than our support of our Reformed Episcopal churches in Cuba. Right now Living Word is their biggest supporter – it's something that all of us here have a hand in. When our bishop takes them our gifts, those churches are exceedingly careful in spending that money. Not a penny is spent in any one of those churches without the entire vestry signing off on it. They know that it's God's money and they're very careful not to squander it. We need to be like that – and not just with what we give to ministry, but with *all* that we have. Before we give something away or spend it, we need to ask if we're giving or spending it wisely. Will it count for the kingdom?

Let me give you these four principles for giving again: First, it's for everyone – every church and every person in every church. As you have been freely given, give freely yourself. Second, commit to it and make it a regular, preferably a weekly, activity. Third, our giving should be in proportion to what we have been given. And finally, fourth, when you give, give responsibly. Give through the local church first and foremost, but make sure that all of your giving is to ministries that are responsible not only in their use of your gift but in what they believe and teach.

If Christians would give on these principles the Church would be a very different place. Churches would have no reason to fall into financial difficulties, but the bottom line is that it isn't really about money and finances. It's ultimately about commitment, faith, and having an eternal perspective. Giving is a tangible way to *exercise* our faith in God and I'm convinced based on my reading of Scripture and my experience as a pastor that one of the reasons so many Christians have stagnated in their faith and in their walk with God is because they are unwilling to totally put themselves in his hands. We're willing to trust him for salvation, but we won't trust him to meet our physical needs from day to day. If that's you, consider how often we see Jesus in the gospels healing people's physical bodies in order to show them that they could trust him with their souls. Think of the paralytic who was brought to Jesus. Jesus forgave his sins. When the people around objected saying, "You can't do that! Only God can do that!" Jesus said to the man, "Take up your bed and walk." If that man wasn't sure about Jesus being able to care for his soul, that physical healing removed all doubt.

We've been told that our sins are forgiven and Jesus has told us to pick up our beds and walk, but too many of us keep sitting there on our beds, afraid to get up and walk because we doubt that it's true. But where would the faith of the paralytic have been had he just kept sitting there, doubting the Son of God's power to meet his daily physical needs? That stretcher was his security. He could have kept sitting there, unwilling to give up the security of his stretcher, but I can't even imagine him doing that. And yet we do all the time. Jesus says, "Let your go of your possessions, your money, your stuff, and step out to follow me in faith. Look to find your security in me, not in things." And so I urge you. In the knowledge that through Jesus Christ God had forgiven your sins, trust him now to take care of everything else. Take up your bed and walk. And I guarantee that if you'll do that, just like the paralytic, you'll never regret that you did.

Please pray with me: Heavenly Father, open our eyes to all the blessings you have given us that we might always see just how much you have freely given. We ask that you would expand our faith that in response to your goodness, we might more and more each day respond to your goodness by worshipfully and generously returning to you a portion of what you have given. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen..