

Life Together

*Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?
If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him.
For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.
(1 Corinthians 3:16-17. ESV)*

*And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same
image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.
(2 Corinthians 3:18. ESV)*

The Jerusalem Offering

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1 Corinthians 16:1-4

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Introduction:

Good morning! Please open your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 16:1; that's on page 962 in your pew Bible. We are very near the end of Paul's letter to the Corinthians. As we mentioned a few weeks ago, chapter 15 is generally understood as the theological climax of the letter. That means that theologically speaking, you have done the heavy lifting in terms of understanding this book of the Bible. Chapter 16 is a bit of a wrap up chapter. It is characterized by brief and pointed imperatives – commands – as Paul assumes that the Corinthians having received and understood the doctrine in the previous 15 chapters and are now prepared to live in a way that responds to what they have heard. Specifically, here in the first 4 verses of chapter 16 Paul assumes that they are ready to give generously to a project that historians refer to as “The Jerusalem Offering”. This project is mentioned several times in the New Testament and we will read the verses before us but also dip into a few of the other references in order to understand what this passage is about and why it remains relevant for us today. Hear now the Word of the Lord:

¹ Now concerning the collection for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do. 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. ³ And when I arrive, I will send those whom you accredit by letter to carry your gift to Jerusalem. ⁴ If it seems advisable that I should go also, they will accompany me. (1 Corinthians 16:1–4 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

What Is This Passage About?

Let's begin by making sure that we understand what this passage is about. Sometimes this passage gets recruited into a general discussion about tithing but that isn't really what Paul is talking about here. Paul is inviting them to participate in a particular mission project. Now that isn't to say that this passage can't teach us anything about church giving in general – it can – it just has to be handled carefully. One Bible scholar puts it this way:

While Paul's guidance here may well be applied to other financial commitments the members of a congregation take on (including commitments to a church's annual budget and other financial needs) it should be noted that Paul is not discussing giving towards a church's regular budget but the preparations to be taken for one particular and special project.¹

That's important for us to understand. We are talking here about something very specific – there are general principles to be gleaned of course, but what is really in focus here is a special project for which the Apostle Paul is soliciting above and beyond giving. In the Christian life there is regular, faithful, local giving. We generally call that tithing. This is not a sermon about tithing because this is not a passage about tithing. This is a passage about above and beyond giving. Paul is calling on this church to overflow. He sees an opportunity and he wants them to see it, to catch the vision for it, and to contribute generously to it. That's what this is about.

In terms of the specifics of this project it seems that Paul was gathering a collection from Gentile churches in Asia Minor, Macedonia and Greece and he was intending to deliver it to the church in Jerusalem. The Christians in Jerusalem were struggling in a way that the Christians in Asia Minor and Europe were not. Some of that had to do with the persecution that they faced from the Jewish authorities. We tend to think of persecution in terms of the later persecution under the Romans, but for the first 70 years or so of Christian history Romans did not greatly distinguish Christians from Jews. They viewed Christians as a subset of Judaism. The real persecution of Christians in the first generation came from the Jewish synagogue. It was centralized in Jerusalem. Therefore when people who were mostly Jews became Christians they were cut off from Judaism and cut off from religious and community forms of support. You have to remember that Israel was a theocracy so religion and politics overlapped. There was no “secular welfare system” there was the temple and the temple treasury and if you were a Christian Jewish

¹Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary. Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 843.

widow then you were in desperate straights. That's why in Acts 6 we see the first activity of the church being the care of desperate widows. So Paul is seeing an opportunity here. He knows that the resources of the church in Jerusalem are stretched to the breaking point with the care of these Jewish Christian widows. He knows that a gift from these Gentile churches will go along way towards creating a sense of community between Gentile and Jewish believers and it will help ensure that the church doesn't splinter into two rival factions. Paul saw that and he knew the value of that and he invited this church to give into that. That's what this passage is about.

Now that's interesting and those of you who enjoy history are probably glad to have heard that, but of course we don't come to church just to learn history. We come believing that the Bible speaks today. We come believing that this passage has something to say to us. And it does.

What Is The Relevance Of This Passage For Us Today?

I think there are three things at least, that this passage has to say to us today and I offer them to you in ascending order of importance. First of all then, and I suppose, least important of the three, I think this passage:

1. It tells us something about how offerings were collected in the early church

Now remember that this passage is about a very specific offering project. Therefore it has SOMETHING TO SAY but it doesn't say everything we would want to know about all manner of religious offerings. There are other verses we want to consult to in order to develop a fully orbbed understanding of worship offerings. This is just one. This is about "above and beyond" giving. That being said, there are principles here that I think apply to all offerings. I think we can see 4 things worth noting about how offerings were gathered in the early church.

i. Offerings were collected weekly

Paul says:

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. (1 Corinthians 16:2 ESV)

Offerings were a part of the weekly worship. That comes out of the Jewish mindset that the Apostle Paul has inherited. The Old Testament tells people how to enter God's presence for worship. It says:

¹⁶They shall not appear before the LORD empty-handed. ¹⁷Every man shall give as he is able, according to the blessing of the LORD your God that he has given you. (Deuteronomy 16:16–17 ESV)

That sounds very much like what we have here. Each time you gather for worship, you should bring an offering.

In these verses we also see the second principle:

ii. Offerings are given in proportion to income

We see that in Deuteronomy and we see it in 1 Corinthians 16:2. The ESV renders that “as he may prosper” which is literally correct but the NIV is easier to understand; it says you should give:

in keeping with your income... (1 Corinthians 16:2. NIV)

That's the idea. Percentage based giving is the very definition of fair. If you don't make very much then you don't have to give very much. If you make a lot, then a lot is expected of you. That's the idea, Old Testament and New.

Thirdly we see that:

iii. Offerings are to be given in an orderly fashion

Paul says that he wants the collection to happen each week, to be stored somewhere at the church and to be ready for him when he comes so that there doesn't need to be any scrambling at the last minute. Paul is not in favour of high pressure tactics at offering time. He is advocating for regular, planned, budgeted giving.

I'll be honest with you, I don't like high pressure tactics when it comes to giving. I will just tell you this now, if you come to my house and ring my door bell and send your cutest kid up to my door to solicit funds for your favourite charity I will almost certainly not make a large donation. At best I will give what is in my pocket. That just isn't the way I like to do giving. It seems manipulative to me and it seems disorderly. My wife and I agree together at the start of the year what our giving target will be. We then budget around that. We try to give until it hurts. We discuss our giving at the table with the children. We explain that the reason we can't go to Disney World every year is because we have budgeted our giving and it has to come first. There is a place for spontaneous giving – don't over hear me – but the emphasis in the Bible is on planned, orderly giving. You give more when you plan to give more. You also give better.

Fourthly we see that:

iv. Offerings are given in and through the church

Paul expects these offerings to be collected in the context of the weekly worship service. On the first day of the week – that's when Christians gathered to worship. They celebrated the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, they had communion together and they gave offerings. They gave offerings in and through the church. We see that also in Acts:

³⁴There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold ³⁵and **laid it at the apostles' feet**, and it was distributed to each as any had need. (Acts 4:34–35 ESV)

The expression “laid it at the apostles' feet” is an idiom that simply means “placed it under their authority”. The offerings were released to the authority of the church officers. That's exactly what we do here. Your offerings are released to the authority of the elected elders of the church. I am not one of them. I am a pastoral elder – or an unelected elder – and I have ZERO fiduciary authority in this church. The elected elders receive the money, steward the money and distribute the money according to a budget that they draft and you approve. That is the smartest and most Biblical way to do your giving. It protects you from operating merely on passion and instinct – we are all suckers for a commercial with a crying child in it – this way ensures that there is some sober thought as to the distribution and use of your funds. It also helps you learn humility and a sense of community spirit and it helps ensure that the credit goes to the church generally and to

Christ specifically rather than to YOU. If you just write big checks to your favourite charity then YOU will look great but the church is not commended and neither is Christ so unless you are prepared to die on a cross to save those people you haven't actually MOVED THE BALL! Do your giving in a way that the church is commended and CHRIST is GLORIFIED among the nations. Do it through the Body of Christ. Do it through the church.

Secondly, in terms of the enduring relevance of this passage for us, we notice that:

2. It tells us something about the value of church partnership

Look carefully again at verse 1:

Now concerning the collection for the saints: as I directed **the churches of Galatia**, so you also are to do. (1 Corinthians 16:1 ESV)

The churches of Galatia were in Asia Minor – what we today call western Turkey. Paul is saying this to a church in Corinth – which is in modern day Greece. Paul is building here an international coalition of like minded churches in pursuit of a common missionary goal. This tells us something very important. It tells us that while MOST ministry does and should happen through the local church and her members and her officers, SOME ministry is best done through a partnership of like minded churches; what we might call a denomination or an association of churches.

Some of you will know that this was the original motivation for the earliest Baptist associations. Baptist churches are congregational with respect to church polity – that is to say that they believe in the priority and essential capacity of the local church – but they also understood that some tasks that are central to the progress of the Gospel will require churches to work together.

William Carey, known as the father of modern missions, was a Baptist. He was one of what we call now “The Baptist 5”. 5 churches and 5 pastors came together to support William Carey in what is often referred to as the first Protestant European missionary venture. 5 churches gathered together to send and support William Carey in his mission to India. William Carey went down the well and 5 churches stayed and held the rope. It was too big for any 1 church to do alone so they came together in an association. There is room for that. There is a need for that. A small

association of like minded churches putting their resources together can do things that could not be done by a single church working alone. We need to hear that. We need to hear all of that. It doesn't have to be a big association, but it does have to be made up of like minded churches and it does have to be for a big Gospel purpose. There is more we could say about that but there is 1 more thing we need to say about the enduring relevance of this passage.

Thirdly, and lastly I think this passage remains relevant to us today because:

3. It tells us something about the motivation behind “above and beyond” Christian giving

Remember that this isn't a passage about tithing. These people were presumably giving generously to support the local work and worship that God had given them to do. This is something more. This is something extra. This is overflow. What motivates people to give more than they have to give – that is a question that this passage helps us to answer. We know that Paul framed this particular offering as entirely voluntary. He didn't “require” his churches to do this – they did it willingly and even eagerly. He says in 2 Corinthians about the Macedonian churches participating in this project:

³ they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, **of their own accord**, ⁴ begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints— (2 Corinthians 8:3–4 ESV)

That isn't normally how pastors talk about the offering! Pastors don't normally get together and talk about how their people were BEGGING for the opportunity to give above and beyond their means and how we did them a favour by pointing them towards some voluntary opportunities. That just isn't how it normally goes. So why were these people so eager to give in this unusual way? There are some clues in this text and in the several other texts that mention this particular project. First of all and most immediately in terms of the context in 1 Corinthians 16, I think we can say that:

- i. Above and beyond givers are motivated by their vision of eternity

That is the ideological connection that we observe in this very passage. In chapter 15 the Apostle Paul concludes his teaching on the doctrine of the bodily resurrection and the eternal life to come in the new heavens and the new earth and then he says:

Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain. (1 Corinthians 15:58 ESV)

Because you know that there is life beyond this life, because you know that the life beyond this life is ETERNAL LIFE and that there are rewards and consequences – that how we live in this life ECHOES IN ETERNITY – BECAUSE YOU KNOW THAT – be steadfast, immovable, always ABOUNDING in the work of the Lord. Knowing that your labour is not in vain. This kind of giving makes SENSE when you understand the glorious end of the Gospel story. When you get the Gospel you give GENEROUSLY. How could you not?

Jim Elliot, the missionary who was killed by the natives he was trying to reach with the Gospel wrote in his journal before his death: “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose”. The generosity that looks CRAZY to us ACTUALLY MAKES PERFECT SENSE TO PEOPLE who have understood the Gospel.

My dear friends, the question in the Bible is never: “How little may I give?” It is never: “What is the minimum I am allowed to give?” It is always: “How much can I give! Where should I give? What are the needs of God’s people? Where is the Spirit moving in mission? How can I contribute and be involved in the progress of this Gospel to all the nations?” How we live and how we serve in this life echoes in eternity. Daniel 12:2-3 – one of the passages that the Apostle relied on in making his case for the bodily resurrection makes that point very clear:

² And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. ³ And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and **those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.** (Daniel 12:2-3 ESV)

The Bible says that if you are wise in the ways of salvation then you will shine like the brightness of the sky above – that’s a good thing – but if you turn many to righteousness – if you bring many people to the righteousness of God in Jesus Christ – you will SHINE LIKE THE STARS FOREVER AND EVER! What you believe about eternity CHANGES THE MATH for every decision that you make in this present life. The Macedonians knew that. Paul assumes here in

chapter 16 that the Corinthians now know that and so he presents them an opportunity for above and beyond giving.

Secondly, I think its fair to say that:

ii. Above and beyond givers are motivated by their concern for Christian equity

I'm getting that from 2 Corinthians 8:13 where Paul is again talking about this project. Paul clarifies why taking money from Gentile Christians in Asia Minor, Macedonia and Greece and giving it to Jewish Christians in Jerusalem makes sense from a Biblical perspective. He says:

¹³For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of fairness ¹⁴your abundance at the present time should supply their need, so that their abundance may supply your need, that there may be fairness. ¹⁵As it is written, "Whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack." (2 Corinthians 8:13–15 ESV)

Paul quotes here from Exodus 16:18 in the LXX translation. This is from the story about the manna. The idea here was that God provided enough manna for every member of the covenant community to have a fair portion. Paul takes that principle and he says, essentially, in the New Covenant community we should expect God to do the same. He will provide enough for every Christian to have what they need for life and ministry. But it appears that he is recruiting us to participate in the process of distribution. He gives some people 5 servings so that they can eat one and distribute 4. He doesn't mean for you to eat 5 servings while 4 other brothers and sisters go hungry, no he intends for you to willingly, eagerly, voluntarily SERVE ONE ANOTHER.

There is a sense in which abundance is a test. The Apostle Paul says that in 2 Corinthians 8:8.

I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine. (2 Corinthians 8:8 ESV)

Abundance is a test to see whether your love is genuine. Let me bring this down to street level. As a father, I could learn a lot about my children if I played a little game with their lunches one day when I packed them off for school. I have 4 children who all attend the same school. Suppose that I put all four lunches in one child's bag and put nothing in the bags of the others. When that one child opened her bag she would immediately face a test. She could choose to

understand those 4 sandwiches as proof that I love her more than her 3 siblings. Or she could see in those 4 sandwiches proof that I trust her to distribute. What will she see? What kind of child is she? Is she yet saved? I'll know by who ends up eating those sandwiches. That's what Paul is saying and that leads me to my final point.

iii. Above and beyond givers are motivated by their love for the family of Jesus Christ

Another way to say this would be to say that above and beyond givers and above and beyond givers have read and believed the parable of the sheep and the goats. Or maybe it would be better to say that above and beyond givers look like they have read and believed the parable of the sheep and the goats. They live like the SHEEP PEOPLE in that story – they have the same instinctive motivation. Do you remember that story? Jesus said:

³¹ “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. ³² Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. ³⁴ Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink?’ ³⁸ And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you?’ ³⁹ And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ ⁴⁰ And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’ (Matthew 25:31–40 ESV)

Are you hearing that? This parable is not saying that people become sheep by caring for the family of Jesus Christ – no the sheep were sheep before Jesus began talking about their activities – no this parable says that the sheep just instinctively gravitated toward the family of Jesus. They loved the least of these my brethren because they loved Jesus! Their love was genuine. They were the real deal. They passed the test! They didn't know it was a test, they didn't fake it to make it – they just did it because it was in them to do it. Jesus put it there – he said he would. He said that they will know that you are my disciples by your love for one another; and this foreign love grows and grows and gradually begins to dictate and determine decisions that would otherwise be absolutely crazy. That's what happens to really saved people. They start doing really crazy things. They give and they live ABOVE AND BEYOND. They look like fools to many; but he is no fool; she is no fool, who gives what she cannot keep to gain what she cannot lose.

That is the math of the truly converted; that is the REASON of the redeemed, and this is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.