

What did you put in the offering plate this morning? Is that question too forward? Too personal? Alright then, let's try a more “spiritual” question. Do you think God is pleased with how and what you gave? And what about ministry? Have you offered your time and energy to Christian ministry this past week? There are lots of people who did, because we had nearly 200 children here this week for VBS. First Corinthians 16 will help us to think through both of these questions.

*“Now about the collection for the Lord’s people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do”* (v. 1). Paul is responding to an inquiry from the Corinthian church. A famine, prophesied by the prophet Agabus in Acts 11:28, had struck the region of Judea, leaving many in the Jerusalem church impoverished. As a result, Paul encouraged his churches to contribute towards their relief. Evidently, he had already approached the church in Corinth about it and they had practical questions regarding collecting and sending the money.

First, he writes about collecting: *“On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made”* (v. 2). The Lord’s people are to make regular contributions on the Lord’s Day. They are not to wait until Paul arrives to take up a hurried offering. Instead, they are to take up weekly offerings, which they then store up until Paul comes. By not waiting until the last moment to give, time and effort is saved, and undoubtedly more money is collected. By the way, the reference to collecting on the first day of the week indicates that the church was already gathering each Sunday for worship.

Each person is to give *“in keeping with your income.”* It may be that someone makes a lot of money one week. They should give accordingly. It may be that someone earns very little money. If so, they are not expected to give as much. Unlike the world which measures the worth of contributions according to total dollars, the kingdom of God measures contributions according to one’s means. Remember that Jesus saw a poor woman place two small coins in the Temple offering that he counted as more valuable than the large dollar amounts of the rich who were giving out of their excess.

Secondly, he wrote about sending the money. *“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”* (vss. 3-4). Here’s the plan. The Corinthians are to select representatives whom they have deemed trustworthy to take the money to Jerusalem. They will not go alone. They will join Paul if he determines to go as well, which was his plan. He later tells the church in Rome, after collecting the money, that he would deliver it to Jerusalem. But there will also be other travelers, representatives chosen by the other churches; Luke names seven others in Acts 20:4.

Why these representatives? Security would be a practical reason. They will be carrying a sizable amount of money. Another reason is accountability. Corruption existed in money matters in the ancient church as it often does today. And probably the main reason was that these representatives served as personal ambassadors for their churches to encourage their sister churches in Judea and Jerusalem.

That covers what Paul has to say about money. In the verses that follow he discusses ministry, his own and others. First, about himself: *“After I go through Macedonia, I will come to you—for I will be going through Macedonia. Perhaps I will stay with you for a while, or even spend the winter, so that you can*

*help me on my journey, wherever I go. For I do not want to see you now and make only a passing visit; I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits. But I will stay on at Ephesus until Pentecost, because a great door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many who oppose me” (5-9).*

Paul the Apostle was a moving target. He was an itinerant minister, whose main objective was to plant churches in areas that have never received the gospel. His journey, however, in Macedonia (northern Greece) will be to visit churches he had already planted, such as those in Philippi and Thessalonica. He hopes, then, to return south to Corinth for the winter. [Very smart!]

Verse 8 lets us know that Paul is writing this letter from Ephesus. He mentions a *“a great door for effective work has opened to me.”* Acts 19 tells us about that work. He spoke daily in a lecture hall, so that *“This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord”* (19:10). Not only did he preach, but he performed miracles of healing and drove out demons—which we will focus on next Sunday.

But to the point, his ministry was making a noticeable impact in the way of life of the territory. Listen to this report in verses 18-20: *“Many of those who believed now came and openly confessed what they had done. A number who had practiced sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly. When they calculated the value of the scrolls, the total came to fifty thousand drachmas. In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.”*

Perhaps even more telling is that a silversmith successfully led a riot opposing Paul because his ministry was converting enough people to put a dent in the idol-making industry of Ephesus. People were actually changing their lives in response to their new found faith! But the riot also proved Paul’s comments that he had many adversaries. If not for the intervention of friends, Paul probably would have been killed by the mob protesting his ministry. How many people do you think would start churches if they knew their personal safety would be threatened?

Reading a couple of verses beyond today’s Scripture, we learn of the ministry of Timothy: *“When Timothy comes, see to it that he has nothing to fear while he is with you, for he is carrying on the work of the Lord, just as I am. No one, then, should treat him with contempt. Send him on his way in peace so that he may return to me. I am expecting him along with the brothers”* vs. 10-11). Timothy was one of a number of young men who traveled with Paul as assistant ministers, highly regarded by Paul. Twenty-six times he is mentioned in the New Testament, and two books are letters that Paul wrote to Timothy, giving him counsel as he ministered at Ephesus. Paul would send Timothy and other men to churches that he had established to check on them and, as necessary, to minister for a while, serving as his representative.

This is the second such mission on which Paul sent Timothy to Corinth, and he anticipates possible friction. Don’t forget the tensions between Paul and the Corinthian Church that appear throughout the letter. Those tensions are seen in a remark Paul makes about an earlier trip that Timothy made to the church. Timothy has to represent Paul to a church that is rejecting Paul’s authority and he is to “remind them” of Paul’s teachings. No wonder Paul says, *“no one should treat him with contempt.”* Imagine being a young man given the job of checking on and *correcting* a rebellious church!

The biblical principle of giving reveals the value that God imparts to each of us. What I mean is this: Let’s say you are a child whose only income is an allowance and maybe a little extra money for chores.

This past week, your grand total of income was \$1.00. You decide to give 50 cents in the offering plate. As far as God is concerned, your offering is more valuable than the offering of some people who may have given \$1000. If God ran a university, the buildings on campus would more likely be named for obscure persons who gave what amounted to a pittance, rather than donors who gave large sums of money. It means that everyone is put on the same playing field when it comes to the value of their financial contributions. The wealthy and the poor are credited according to their means and by the attitude of their hearts.

Another insight about giving that comes from this passage is the value of regular, proportionate giving. The Bible's campaign slogan is "Just Give." Don't rely on emotional appeals in order to convince you to part with your money. On the other hand, don't act compulsively, pledging large amounts beyond your ability to pay. Prayerfully establish what you are able to give, and give it regularly and consistently. Set aside a consistent percentage of your income and give it on a regular basis. Then, be prepared to give as special needs arise.

In this case, one part of the world-wide church was suffering. When that need became known, other churches that were not suffering pooled their money to help out. Even then, the money was raised through the disciplined giving of many people over a reasonable amount of time. No one was called upon to impoverish themselves, even though their giving would have been sacrificial.

We do the same thing through the 25 or more Benevolences that our church supports. They are financial gifts above and beyond the regular offerings which support the everyday expenses of our church. By giving regularly and proportionally from our income, we collectively give substantially to the work of God's kingdom. As individuals, it is pleasing to our heavenly Father who delights in our generosity, regardless of the amount we are able to give.

It seems to me that we do ministry for two reasons: 1. To honor our Lord and 2. To demonstrate God's love for our neighbor. Paul did not give up on the Corinthian Church because he loved these stubborn, immature believers. He loved them all. As Paul wrote only a few chapters earlier, "*Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things*" (13:7, RSV).

But it all comes down to this. Our attitude toward money and ministry should reflect that of our Lord Jesus. The gospel tells us that though he was rich, he became poor for our sake. Though he was wealthy beyond all measure, he gave up everything to serve us. The gospel tells us that though we did not choose him, he chose us to be his disciples and friends; though his own people rejected him, though his own disciples deserted him, for the sake of his love, he died to save us all.

This is the love of Jesus. This is the love that was made manifest through his generosity toward us.

And this is the love that he has given to all of us. We too are "called to give." Amen.

\*Some of this sermon is borrowed from Pastor D. Marion Clark of Eatonton, Georgia