

GIVING AND LIVING

by Ray C. Stedman

We have now come to the 16th and last chapter of First Corinthians. In previous chapters we have covered the great issues of this letter and they have all been faced and settled:

- First, the "carnalities," the things the Apostle Paul saw needed correction in Corinth, as they still need correction in California. All these terrible things that were dividing this church and keeping it from making an impact on Corinth were dealt with in the first eleven chapters of this letter.
- Then we came to the "spiritualities," the things that needed increased emphasis in Corinth, as in California -- the gifts of the Spirit, distributed to everyone, the fruit of the Spirit, the loving atmosphere in which these gifts are to be manifest, and the great hope of the resurrection.
- Now, in Chapter 16, we come to the "practicalities," the things that touch upon specific activities and that especially help us to see the principles to guide us in doing these things.

There are three very practical matters in this chapter -- how to give, how to plan and schedule, and how to work with others -- and they are very practically touched upon. We are only going to take the first two today, and we begin with the subject of giving.

If you eliminate this chapter division, it is rather striking here in Chapter 16 how Paul moves from the great and lofty themes of the resurrection, where you almost hear the sound of the "last trump" ringing in your ears, and suddenly he says, "And now concerning the collection," which proves that money is not to be separated from the great spiritual entities of Christianity. It is very important.

This whole chapter really grows out of the 58th verse of Chapter 15, where Paul is exhorting us to be "always abounding in the work of the Lord." Out of that come the themes of Chapter 16, including giving, because giving is one way you can "abound in the work of the Lord."

The apostle starts with that:

Now concerning the contribution 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 contributions need not be made 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 Cor 16:1-4 RSV}

He is talking, of course, about the collection that was being made in many churches to send to the troubled, discouraged, and afflicted church in Jerusalem. This is a theme very close to Paul's heart, and he mentions it in several of his letters. He is very anxious that these Gentile churches, scattered in the Roman world, should have a part in meeting the needs of the afflicted saints in Jerusalem. As you read the book of Acts, you can see there are two reasons why this church in Jerusalem was having trouble -- one of them was circumstantial, and the other is consequential, that is, one they are to blame for, and the other they are not.

The one they were not to blame for was a series of famines that had occurred. These are also mentioned in the book of Acts -- times of drought such as we went through recently here in California. Crops did not grow adequately, and with a limited system of distribution, they were without food.

But then there was another reason why the church was suffering, and that was their own failure to obey what the Lord had said. Just before his ascension, Jesus said to this church, "begin in Jerusalem and then go to all

Judea and Samaria and then reach out to the uttermost part of the earth," {cf, Acts 1:8}. Reading the record of Acts, you can see that they totally ignored those words. They were having a great time in Jerusalem. They had all the apostles teaching them; they had all the gifts of the Spirit manifest in their midst; they were experiencing miracles and wonders and signs, and they had tremendous numbers of people, thousands, converted at a time. Nobody wanted to leave. They were enjoying their privileges and clinging to them, so the Lord, in his wisdom, sent a time of persecution. Acts tells us that at the time of the death of Stephen there broke out a great persecution against the church which forced them out. In the process they lost their resources. All the wealthy people were driven away or they lost their wealth. So this church was reduced to poverty, to penury, and they were unable to pay their bills. It became at last the privilege of the Gentile churches who had profited from them spiritually to minister to their material needs.

This is a beautiful picture here of the way the church is one all over the earth. What happens to our brothers and sisters in other corners of the earth is, and ought to be, of immediate concern to us as well. So Paul exhorts these churches here in Corinth and other places to meet that need.

In the process of doing this, he gives us some wonderful principles to govern our giving. You seldom hear a message on this, but the Word of God, as it does with everything else, touches even this area of our life and gives us some guidelines on how to give. There are seven marvelous principles in this brief paragraph. Let me point them out to you.

First, you will note, giving is a universal practice. Paul says to the Corinthians,

... as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do. {1 Cor 16:1b RSV}

It was not just something that the Corinthians had to do. Everywhere Paul went, wherever he founded a church, he taught them to give, because giving is an essential part of Christianity. It is not an option; it is something every Christian must do. Remember the words of Jesus, "freely you have received, freely give," {cf, Matt 10:8}.

Now, if you have not received anything from the Lord, by all means do not give anything. Keep your money. We do not want it if God has not moved in your life. But if he has, remember you could not have bought that for any amount of money. You have received that gift of enrichment, of forgiveness, of healing of your home, or your marriage, or whatever it is, without charge to you. "Freely you have received, freely give."

A young man was telling me this last week about how he was working with some brand new Christians. He wanted to set up subsidies for them so that they would have their bills paid while they learned to develop as Christians. I told him if he did that he would ruin them. The apostles never did that. They taught people to give when they had hardly anything, because giving is essential for a Christian. Giving is the very essence and breath of Christianity.

The second principle is that it is to be done every week:

On the first day of every week, {1 Cor 16:2a RSV}

This is one of the first indications we have in the epistles that the Christians, by this time, had begun to gather regularly to worship and pray and give on the first day of the week, Sunday. The Jewish day of worship, of course, is Saturday (actually it begins on Friday evening). Even now these Christians have forsaken that and have begun to worship on the first day of the week, Sunday, which was the day of resurrection.

It is no accident that this paragraph follows the great themes of resurrection in Chapter 15, for the essence of the new life in Christ is that it is a new beginning, it is life on a different level entirely. The Christians worshipped on that day because it was the day that Jesus rose from the dead. So the apostle gathers this whole matter of giving and associates it as flowing out of their wonder at the resurrection of Jesus, and their worship of a risen Lord. That, he says, is the atmosphere in which you are to give, on the first day of the week.

Then, third, giving is a personal act,

... each [one] of you ... {1 Cor 16:2b RSV}

He does not leave anybody out. Even children ought to be taught to give. It may be only a few pennies, a nickel or a dime, but on every Sunday there ought to be a gift from every Christian. It is not the amount that is important at all, it is the regularity of it, the fact that there is a continual reminder that you have freely received, therefore, freely give. So each one is to do this. It is, in that sense, really not an option. It is a necessity growing out of our relationship to Christ.

Fourth, Paul says,

... each of you is to put something aside and store it up, ... {1 Cor 16:2c RSV}

He is referring to the fact that, in that culture, people got paid every day. They were to go home and put aside, in the sugar bowl, each day a certain amount of money so that on Sunday they would have a larger amount to bring to the services, and contribute to the needs of others. Now the principle, of course, is that they had an objective they had determined upon. They were not merely giving to nothing or everything, but they had determined that they would have a part in a specific need and they were giving regularly to meet that need.

This is a very important principle. I find a lot of people today only respond to emotional appeals, and there are thousands of them. You get them in the mail as I do -- all these appeals to give to crying babies and hurting people all around the world. These are legitimate appeals for help, but what I am stressing is that these things need to be investigated as to who is responsible for handling their funds. There are a lot of charlatans and rascals and racketeers in this field today, making appeals and building fortunes on the gullibility of Christians who give to anything, without investigation. There are people actually making millions of dollars every year from Christians who do this. But here Paul says that the Corinthians should make a decision and have a definite objective in view.

Then a fifth principle is,

... as he may prosper, {1 Cor 16:2d RSV}

That means you give according to the way God has given to you. Has he poured out abundantly? Then give abundantly. Are you having a hard time and barely making it? Well, then your gift can be reduced proportionately. It ought to be something, but it can be very little because God is really not interested in the total amount at all. He is only interested in the motive of the heart in giving. That is why Jesus said of the woman who cast in two tiny pieces of money, "she has cast more in than all they which have cast into the treasury," {Mark 12:43 KJV}. This proportion is to be based on your awareness of how much God has given to you and how much the motive of your heart has been stirred by the gifts and grace of God.

Now that is not the tithe. "Tithe" means ten per cent, and, in the Old Testament, the Israelites were told to give a tithe. They had to give ten per cent, it did not matter whether they were poor or rich. Ten per cent to a poor person might be very difficult to give, while ten per cent to a rich person would never be missed. There has arisen, unfortunately, in Christian circles the idea that God wants ten per cent and you can do what you like with the rest, you can indulge yourself to the full. That, of course, is entirely contrary to the principle the New Testament is teaching. No, if God has richly blessed you, then increase the percentage of your giving so that it is ten, twenty, thirty, forty, fifty per cent. There are Christians I know of today whom God has richly blessed who give ninety per cent of their income away. They live on the remaining ten per cent and they live abundantly well on that. Now that is what this is talking about. Nowhere in the New Testament do you find tithing taught or laid upon Christians. But proportionate giving is, for God does not give us wealth in order to lavish it in abundant measure upon ourselves but that we might share it more abundantly with those who have pressing needs. If this simple principle were thoroughly grasped, all the needs of Christendom would be abundantly met by those who give as God has prospered them.

The sixth principle is very important. Paul says do this,

... so that contributions need not be made when I come. {1 Cor 16:2e RSV}

Now why would he say that? Well, because this apostle knew that he, when he was personally present, had a tremendous impact on people. He did not want their giving to come because they were moved by his preaching, or by his stories of what God had done, or in any other way be pressured into giving. He does not want any "extortion," literally, is what he says in Second Corinthians, when he comes to this subject again.

I want to tell you there is an awful lot of extortion going on in Christendom today on this subject of giving money. Psychological tricks and gimmicks of all kinds are played upon people, tremendous emotional pressure is built up in meetings to get them to open their pocketbooks and give. But no professional fund raisers were permitted in the early churches. Paul says, "I do not want any of that going on when I come. Do not bring out the thermometer. Do not have a three-ring circus going on with people running down the aisle trying to meet a particular goal. I do not want that," he says, "I want your giving to come out of a heart that has been moved by the grace of God." God does not want giving on any terms other than those.

The seventh principle is set forth in Verses 3-4:

And when I arrive, I will send those whom you accredit by letter to carry your gift to Jerusalem. {1 Cor 16:3 RSV}

Another rendering of that is a little better:

I will accredit by letter those whom you choose to bear your gift to Jerusalem. {1 Cor 16:3 RCS Rendition}

It is Paul who is going to write the letter. He knows these people in Jerusalem and he will write a letter assuring them that the ones who bring this money are trustworthy, responsible men. He will be glad to do that so that these men can bring the gift, or,

If it seems advisable that I should go also, they will accompany me. {1 Cor 16:4 RSV}

All he is emphasizing here is that giving should be carried out responsibly, and there is a provision made to see that it gets to its source in the right way. He is very careful, as we see in other letters, that he does not have this responsibility himself.

What a contrast this is with many people today who come by and exhort you to give. They take the money themselves, they never give an accounting for it, and they use it in ways they never mention. Hundreds of thousands of dollars are misused in that way. When Victor Whetzel and I were in Poland, a Polish pastor, and others we met there, told us that there are huge warehouses filled with Bibles that have been bought by American Christians, ostensibly to be sent into Russia, that cannot be got through the borders. They are simply stacked up in warehouses in countries like Yugoslavia. This pastor told us how he was so embarrassed because he had received a shipment of Bibles that he himself was told to try to get into Russia. He could not do it, so, not knowing what else to do, he had buried them in his back yard. Yet appeals for funds are still being made by these organizations to get Bibles into Russia. Now that is wrong. That is irresponsible handling of funds.

Thank God, all the organizations working in this field do not act that way. Many of them honestly tell you when they do not need any more funds or when they are waiting until they can get an opportunity to get through. You ought to be careful in your giving, and see that there is a responsible use of money, and that it is delivered where it was intended to go. The apostle wisely guides us in this area.

Now here again are the principles for giving:

1. A universal practice,
2. A weekly activity,
3. A personal act,

4. A predetermined objective,
5. A proportionate amount,
6. An unpressured response,
7. A responsible delivery.

If Christian congregations would act, and move, and give on these principles today what a change would occur, and how the gospel itself would be honored by that.

In the next section, which we will briefly take this morning, we have a beautiful picture of how the apostle himself operated. Out of it flows great help to us in learning how to plan and schedule things.

Do you have any problem with that? One of my biggest problems is knowing what to plan, what to schedule, what to commit myself to in the future. I know this is not just a problem with pastors or speakers, it is a problem with every Christian. What do you commit yourself to? How do you make arrangements on that? Well, here are some wonderful principles.

Verse 5:

I will visit you after passing through Macedonia, for I intend to pass through Macedonia, and perhaps I will stay with you or even spend the winter, so that you may speed me on my journey, wherever I go. For I do not want to see you now just in passing; I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits. But I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, for a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries. {1 Cor 16:5-9 RSV}

How gloriously indefinite that is! How unsettled the apostle is in this. This paragraph should make certain advocates of church growth today tear their hair out because they tell us we ought to plan everything well in advance. There is hardly a month goes by but I am asked, "What are your ten-year plans for Peninsula Bible Church?" I reply, "I haven't the slightest idea." "Well," they say, "how about your five-year plan?" "We don't have any," I say. "We are committed to doing consistently, year after year, the principles that God has taught us from the Word, and we plan to keep on doing that until the Lord returns. That is our program for the future." And I think this was the apostle's program. He did not know where he was going to go. He tells us he had a strong desire to go to Rome, but he had had that for years and he had not been able to make it. His plan was constantly changing, so he points out here that there must be a flexibility about this.

Notice that certain things emerge from this.

First, his immediate goals are short-range ones:

... I intend to pass through Macedonia, ... I will stay with you ... {1 Cor 16:5b-6a RSV}

If we note the length of time involved here, it is probably something less than a year that he has planned ahead. The Apostle James suggests that we should not try to plan more than a year ahead. It is all right to think of where you ought to be, and go, and what you ought to do, but limit it to the short-range goal that is possible to accomplish. Do not feel the necessity to try and project interminably into the future, and make definite plans about where you are going to be five or ten years from now. How do you know where you will be?

I read a brief paragraph by Dr. A. W. Tozer this week in which he says to beware the "file-card mentality" that wants to put everything on a three-by-five card -- where you are going to be, and what you are going to do, and how you are going to function. It totally removes us from the surprises and innovation of the Spirit of God who may lead us in unexpected ways, as you see all the way through the book of Acts.

The second principle is that he has flexible commitments. Notice Verse 6:

... perhaps I will stay with you, [and Verse 7] I hope to spend some time with you,

{1 Cor 16:6b, 7b RSV}

These are terms that express desire, but they do not make anything set in concrete.

Now I know people get uncomfortable with this, but there is a good reason for it, and the apostle tells us what it is. It is contained in these words, "if the Lord permits." Paul never forgot that he was a servant of Christ, that he worked for a Master, and though he was free to plan, he never forgot that the Lord was also free to overrule his plans anytime he chose. So Paul always allowed for that possibility.

It used to be customary among many Christians to say, "The Lord willing, I'll do this. The Lord willing, I'll do that." I know that can be run into the ground, but I think it would be good to return to that. I remember hearing of a pastor who announced to his congregation, "I plan to be away for the next week and, Lord willing, I'll be going to this town on Monday and Tuesday and, the Lord willing, I'll go speak at another place on Wednesday night. But on Sunday I'll be back here, whether or no." Now you cannot say that because the Lord may interject illnesses, accidents, a change of plan, a sudden catastrophe, a sudden demand upon you, and there must be some readiness to acknowledge that you are under authority. This is what the apostle makes very clear. He is not a robot being told to go here, and go there. He is an agent free to make plans, and he does so, but he also recognizes that God has the right to check the square that says "none of the above," and send him in a different direction.

Then there is a third principle brought out in the latter part of Verse 6. Paul says he wants to come to Corinth,

... so that you may speed me on my journey, wherever I go. {1 Cor 16:6c RSV}

He expects that God will not give him the whole thing before he starts out, but that he will make provision for him as he goes along.

This is an important principle to remember in undertaking various projects. If we are really convinced that there is a need for something, God has promised to supply our needs, therefore we do not have to have everything in hand before we start. We venture on the power and the provision of God. Now, if it is merely a matter of wants, there is no promise on that. A lot of people feel that they have to somehow get all the funds together before they undertake anything. That makes me suspicious as to whether they should be undertaking that or not. It may be just a want, and not a need. But if there is a feeling, strongly in agreement with others, that this is a need, then God has promised to supply it and he will make provision as you go.

A fourth principle comes in here in Verse 8,

But I will stay in Ephesus [where he is writing this letter] until Pentecost, {1 Cor 16:8 RSV}

We do not know how far in advance that would be, but there is a reason why he chose Pentecost. As you read some of the literature of that day, you discover that Pentecost, which comes 50 days after the Passover time, is the time when shipping resumed in the Aegean Sea. During the winter months it was impossible for these frail little boats to survive in the great storms that would sweep through the Mediterranean, but by Pentecost the weather had calmed and shipping would resume. Paul is simply taking that into account, and he is basing his plans on that fact. This in line with the normal circumstances of life.

The last principle is set forth in Verse 9,

... for a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries. {1 Cor 16:9 RSV}

There are two reasons why he is going to stay. (He could have traveled by land even though the sea lanes were closed.)

One, there is a "wide door for effective service open."

Now you only have to read the 19th chapter of Acts to learn what that wide door was. There we are told that Paul had been driven out of the synagogue and he had to rent a hall to teach in. For six days of the week, one manuscript tells us, for five hours every day the apostle gathered people in that hall and taught them the Word of God. The effect of that phenomenal teaching was that the gospel literally exploded throughout the whole Roman province of Asia. Churches like Colossae and Laodicea and Sardis and Pergamum and other churches that are mentioned in the seven letters in Revelation were planted all through the Lychnus valley. All this because the apostle was teaching revolutionary truth that turned people on, and sent them out with such a spirit of enthusiasm that they could not contain it. Thus, churches were started all over the place. Paul said, "I'm not going to pass that by." "But," he said, "there are many adversaries." And if you read the 19th chapter of Acts you see what they are.

Ephesus was the second greatest city in the whole Roman world. At the heart of it was the Temple of Diana, a pagan temple where idols were worshipped in disgusting and degrading sexual ways. The Christian church stood against the whole traffic of that temple, and yet it was the heart of the city; it was the banking place for all the merchants, and everything gathered around it. In Ephesus also were Jewish synagogues that bitterly opposed what Paul was doing. They hated him and hounded him everywhere. Further, Ephesus was given over to superstition and magic and the occult practices. Then there was the overall authority of Rome, with its indifference to spiritual things.

Against these many adversaries, a tiny church stood, absolutely contrary to everything for which the city stood, and yet with such power and force and effectiveness that it was overturning the economic system of the city; the silversmiths were getting all upset because their idol making business was being destroyed.

Paul is emphasizing here that there have to be both of these things present if you have a true opportunity. There has to be a "wide door," but there have to be "many adversaries." Beware a wide door where there are no adversaries. That could be the trick of the devil to uplift you in pride and make you so confident that you can do something in yourself that you are destroyed thereby. And beware heavy opposition and many adversaries when there is no open door for ministry. Jesus himself told his disciples, "if they will not hear you, shake off the dust from your feet and go to a place where they will," {cf, Matt 10:14, Mark 6:11}. Where there is no opportunity for ministry and oppression is heavy, avoid that; but where there is an open door and many adversaries, then by all means stay with that because you will have one of the most exciting opportunities of your life to see God at work in the midst of great opposition and great pressure.

Well, there are the principles for scheduling your life. I hope they will help you as you plan in the days ahead.

Prayer

We thank you, Father, for the practicality of this section. How it helps us in our living today in this 20th century world. We pray that we may never forget that we go with a living God who works with us and walks beside us, every one of us, all through the day, and we can anticipate his laboring on our behalf. We ask this in the name of Jesus, Amen.

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