

1 CORINTHIANS 16:1-4

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter Paul makes a radical change from doctrinal to the practical. After discussing the resurrection in great detail in chapter 15 he ends his letter with several exhortations in regard to giving, to and doing the Lord's work, faithful living and love within Christian fellowship.

Paul brings us rather abruptly from the future at the end of chapter 15 back to our present world and back to something as mundane but as important, like giving to God's work. However the life to come is not unrelated to life here on earth for whenever God gives us a glimpse of our future it is always for the purpose of helping us to live in the here and now.

A proper understanding of our future will give us an incentive for giving to the Lord or for faithful living and for all the other subjects that Paul deals with briefly in this final chapter. You see if we truly believe that we are going to leave this world and that our earthly bodies one day be transformed and perfectly united with our spirits to live with God for all eternity. Then our concern should be to lay up treasures in heaven while we are here on earth (Matthew 6:20).

The first practical issue of Christian living Paul discusses in chapter 16 is that of giving.

1. THE PURPOSE OF GIVING (v 1)

The fact that Paul speaks of the collection indicates that the church at Corinth already knew about it. The offering was probably mentioned in the letter that the church had written to Paul (7:1) and to which 1 Corinthians was Paul's reply. The collection was for God's people and in particular God's people at Jerusalem (v 3).

Paul had solicited contributions to this collection from the churches in Galatia and was now asking the church at Corinth to do exactly what he had told the Galatian churches to do. The purpose of the offering was to help relieve the poverty that was being experienced by the Christians in Jerusalem (Romans 15:26).

Extreme poverty was common in the early church, as is still the case in many parts of our world. Because of Jerusalem's religious importance it was often overpopulated, especially during times of special feasts and celebrations so that its resources were continually strained. To make matters worse some years earlier there had been a severe famine (Acts 11:28) from which the people were still apparently suffering.

On top of this the Christians at Jerusalem had been persecuted for many years their economic plight was made even more serious by this persecution. Many Christians were put out of their own homes, stripped of their possessions and were prevented from getting any but the most menial of jobs and some Christians were even imprisoned (Acts 8:1-3 and 1 Thessalonians 2:14).

We know from the book of Acts that the church was very generous in supporting one another, they shared everything they had with those in need even to the point of selling their poverty and possessions (Acts 2:44-45 & 4:34) yet their resources obviously did not last indefinitely.

Besides meeting the economic needs of the Christians in Jerusalem, Paul wanted the collection to express the spiritual oneness of the church. The believers in Jerusalem were as I have said predominately Jews and most of the believers in the churches that were asked to contribute to this collection were Gentiles. Therefore Gentiles giving to Jewish believers would help to strengthen the bonds and unity between these two groups because God does not have two churches Jewish and Gentiles but one church and this collection will help to cement that truth and express it in

practical ways. Giving and receiving from others is a sure way of forming bonds between the giver and the receiver for you cannot share gifts without sharing fellowship.

So the primary purpose of giving as taught in the New Testament is to support God's work and primarily the support of Christians within the church. A Christian's first obligation is to support a fellow believer and the church's first financial responsibility is to invest in its own life and its own people (2 Corinthians 8:1-5).

Obviously that is not the only economic obligation that we have for the parable of the Good Samaritan makes it clear that we should help all those in need that come across our path, regardless of their religion culture or circumstances. However, Paul clearly teaches that our first obligation is to God's people but we are to help others as well (Galatians 6:10). So how can we apply this to our own lives and church?

It should not be the case that one church supports its own membership and work without any consideration of God's work elsewhere. All true churches are to support one another as there is need. In our church we have a number of other likeminded churches and Trusts that are helping to support the ministry. They are not only concerned for God's work in their area but are also concerned for God's work and his church here in the Yorkshire Dales.

Likewise our church seeks to use its own limited resources wisely so that we can help other churches and other Christians as the need arises. So over the past year we have sent one off donations to help other churches with their witness in their own locality.

Likewise when there is a famine or disaster in other parts of the world we do have an obligation to help but our first concern should be to help those who are Christians. It is likely that in many parts of the world Christian people will receive less help from Governmental aid because the church is normally persecuted and therefore the church's responsibility should be to help our brothers and sisters who are in need.

I personally always look to give to a clearly Christian charity when I want to help those who suffer from famine etc. Because I know that at least the money will be used wisely and will be given to the right people and in most cases Christian people will receive help or they will be in charge of using the resources to help their fellow countrymen. That in truth not only helps fellow Christians but also helps to promote the Christian cause through compassionate ministries.

Generally speaking unbelievers will help the unbelieving world when there is a natural disaster but as church we must do what we can to help God's church and God's people survive those disasters. Likewise unbelievers will not help God's church in the promotion of the gospel or with aid to their poorer members therefore if Christian churches do not help one another financially and practically then no one else will.

Who will support the work of God here in the Dales? You and I have that responsibility along with other like-minded churches. But who will support God's work in Leeds through Caring for Life or God's work in Iraq and in many other countries. No one else will unless God's people do and God's church does that is why as we will see our giving should always be considered and generous.

2. THE PRINCIPLES OF GIVING (v 2)

In this verse Paul states or implies a number of principles concerning Christian giving. These form a good basis for Christian giving in any age.

a) When Should We Give (v 2)? - The first principle is that the most appropriate period for giving is weekly when the church gathers on the first day of the week. This verse not only should convince us that the church met on Sunday but that its worship included the regular giving of money.

Therefore giving should not be spasmodic when we remember or done only when the church is in a financial crisis or when we have come into a little money or when we feel generous. There may be times when we are led to give more than normal or to give to a particular cause or project within the church but in general terms we should give regularly to the church.

We need to be clear that Paul is not prescribing a legalistic requirement so that every Sunday we have sorted out our money in such a way that we have something to put into the offering box even though we get paid monthly and it is more convenient to give through direct debit or standing order. Paul's point is that giving is part of the regular worship of God and therefore our offering either placed in the box at the back of the church or given directly from our bank accounts should be seen as part of our worship to God. Our giving should be motivated by our desire to worship our God and therefore our giving should be considered and not just done thoughtlessly.

Nor should our giving be based on periodic appeals or on our own personal circumstances but on regular, willing and grateful commitment to God and to His church and people. This verse forces us to consider our own giving to the Lord. It opens up our eyes to the very important principle that giving of our money is worship and therefore it should always be thought about and given in response to the grace that God has shown to us in Jesus Christ.

No worship of God should ever be done thoughtlessly so to come to church and then look in your handbag or pocket for some loose change to put in the offering box is not thoughtful worship of God. So however much you have given to the Lord this week or month let me ask you is it given as part of our worship to God?

Or is it given because we feel we have a responsibility to this church or to the Pastor or to someone else in it. The truth is we do have a responsibility to the church and in supporting the Pastor but our giving must be a reflection of our desire to worship God. If that is truly the case then our giving will be regular, generous and done with right motives.

b) Who Should Give (v 2)? - Paul says each one of you should give. He is obviously referring to Christians within the membership of the church of Corinth but it does include all the membership. No Christian is excused because of their personal circumstances. Every Christian is a steward of what the Lord has given to them no matter how little or how much that may be in economic terms.

It is true that someone who is relevantly well off in terms of money is able to give a lot more than someone who is financially struggling but both have a responsibility to give to the Lord. In fact according to Jesus the person who is not well off might actually give more generously than someone who is more financially blessed (Mark 12:41-44).

So those of us who are working and on reasonable salaries must give generously and those of us who only have pensions to live on must also give generously. The amount of money is not what matters but one's willingness to give generously to the Lord. In truth one will only give generously if we are first of all prepared to give ourselves to the Lord; for then our giving will be a true response of our love and devotion to Him (2 Corinthians 8:5). When we are devoted to the Lord

then we will be devoted to the Lord's people and as a result we will give generously to the Lord's cause no matter how much or little we actually earn or receive in monetary terms.

c) How Much Should We Give (v 2)? -We are told that our giving should be in keeping with our income. Now there are differences of opinion concerning how much of our income Christians should give to the Lord's work. The common traditional answer has been 10 percent.

However it seems that if you look through the various tithes and offerings that the Old Testament people were to give it seems more like 20% or 25% but such giving was more of a tax than it was a voluntary offering to the Lord. When voluntary giving was called for then no set amount was stated for it was to be given from the heart (Exodus 25:1-2).

Therefore I do not think that a Christian is to give 10% of their income and when I say that people often breathe a sigh of relief because they think that they can now justify giving less than 10%. But in truth the fact that we are not demanded to give 10% ought to free us to give more than that and our heart's desire should always be to give as much as we can. But when we think that then we end up giving less than the 10% that we thought was commanded and if we do that then our heart is not in our giving for we are giving reluctantly rather than generously.

Paul tells us we are to give in keeping with our income. So a man earning 40,000 a year is going to give more of their income than someone who is earning a lot less? But 10% of 40,000 is not a lot of money therefore you would expect such a person to give a lot more than what is often considered to be a compulsory figure.

That is why the Bible does not in my view state a percentage or figure for it's the heart that matters not the amount. When the heart is right then the giving will be generous and sacrificial. But not many of us are on huge salaries therefore we must be careful for our hearts are deceitful my dear friends and so often we can use our smaller salaries to justify our lack of generosity.

But generosity does not depend on the size of our salary but it depends on the size of our heart. I wonder when we are doing our budgeting how many of us includes our giving to the Lord as part of our budget. I fear what happens in many Christian households is that we budget and then give to the Lord a portion of what is left, rather than trying to see our giving as part of our overall budget. Can I also urge you to consider reviewing your giving regularly?

For we are to give in keeping with our income so that when our income increases then our giving should also increase. If you are working and have had an increase in your salary then is that increase reflected in our giving. Has your pension increased? Is that reflected in your giving?

I fear that many Christians are giving the same amount of money to the Lord's work today than they did 5 or ten years ago and if that is the case then you are in real terms giving less today than you did 5 or 10 years ago. So we are encouraged to review our giving and make sure it keeps apace with our income and with our affluence.

d) How Should The Church Handle The Lord's Money (vs. 3-4)? - Finally as I conclude Paul gives directions for the distribution of the funds and his point is very simple. The church is to handle the money given very wisely. They are to choose men who are to take this money collected to the church at Jerusalem. Paul will give them a letter of introduction and he will accompany them if it is appropriate. Paul probably means that if the collection is something that is not an embarrassment to him then he will go with the church representatives to Jerusalem.

So the application for us is that the church must always handle money wisely and openly. The point of choosing men to go to Jerusalem is so that there is accountability and openness. There is

no chance of the money being embezzled by one person and there is no chance of people falsely accusing the church of wanting money for anything other than the purpose stated.

As a church we handle a reasonable amount of money each year. It is important that people who are responsible for managing that money are people entrusted by the church. Essentially in our church it is the Elders who are accountable to the members for ensuring that the money is handled wisely and openly.

One reason we have the system of making sure that we have two people who count the offering each week and someone else who keeps the books and banks it etc. is simply to show that we are open and wise in the way the Lord's money is handled. Sadly in some churches money has been stolen or used inappropriately because insufficient procedures were in place to ensure honesty and openness.

The church must be wise in how it handles money. It is not good enough to say we trust those who have any responsibility for handling money we must show that we have taken wise steps to ensure that God's money is handled wisely and is used for the purposes it is given for. That's why at our members meeting our treasurer very kindly shows us where the money given actually goes.

It means that each one of us knows that the church is taking very seriously not only our responsibility to give generously, but also our responsibility for managing and using that money for the purposes of God's work.

To be honest all our procedures are actually a protection for those who handle the money because we live in a day when accusations can so easily be made and even if they are false they can cause so much damage to God's cause. So churches must not be naïve but must be wise and open in the handling of the money and have sufficient protection in place so that false accusations can be easily squashed. God's people give prayerfully therefore the church must ensure those funds are used prayerfully.

So let us take heed of all these principles so that each member will give generously towards God's work and will do so in keeping with our income. Let's remember as we do so that giving is part of our worship of God and therefore should never be done thoughtlessly or carelessly but should be done consistently and generously to the glory of God.

Amen