

SPECIFIC, SIGNIFICANT, INTENTIONAL
1 Corinthians 16:2

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When you go to your doctor for your annual checkup, she or he will poke, prod, and press at various places asking, “Does this hurt? How about here? Tender? Is this uncomfortable?” If somewhere in the midst of the pokes or the pressing you cry out in pain, your doc will order a battery of tests because, as the doctor says, “It’s not supposed to hurt there.” So when, on the rare occasion these days, a pastor dares preach on giving, money, or stewardship, certain folks complain or carp about the discomfort, criticizing the message and the messenger.

Well, either the pastor pushed too hard or perhaps there is something wrong. In that case, we need to do a spiritual exam based on the words of the Great Physician because it’s not supposed to hurt there. (Adapted from Ben Rogers, sermonsearch.com)

So if today makes you a bit edgy or uncomfortable, it may, in fact, be a sign you need a good checkup on stewardship.

We take up an offering each Sunday as an act of worship. There are numerous other ways our folks can give, as well – offering boxes at each door, online giving, bank drafts, etc. In the most primal acts of worship in antiquity, human beings have made an offering to God. Think about the very beginning. Cain and Abel made offerings to God. Think about Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the kings and the prophets of Israel – all made offerings to God. In the New Testament, even Mary, Joseph, and the Baby Jesus went to the temple and made an offering to God. And in our passage today, the Apostle Paul tells the churches in Corinth to collect an offering on Sunday.

Preachers have used various approaches to broach this ever-so-difficult topic.

Some use the “easy-payment plan” approach. That’s where the preacher just doesn’t say very much about giving, tithing, or money. No one in the pew ever gets offended, and nothing ever happens. Churches of this ilk never do a great deal for the kingdom of God. They never have great mission work or social work. They’re comfortable and cozy with the way things are. I’m not interested in a church that doesn’t challenge our people. I don’t think you are either.

Then there is the preacher who takes the “weep and wail plan.” The preacher gets up and cries and wails about the financial crisis in the church. Sometimes his wife will join him, with running mascara. That one was made famous by...well, you remember who she was. I don’t like that approach either.

Then there is the “pie-in-the-sky” approach, where the preacher promises that you’re planting seeds to reap a harvest or going to buy your way into heaven. Reminds me of the pastor who got

a phone call from the richest, meanest, nastiest man in town who asked if he would go straight to heaven if he left his entire estate to the church. The pastor thought for a moment and said, “Well, I certainly think it’s worth a try.” We believe we’re saved by grace and not by gifts, so I’m not so much for that one either. (This section heavily borrowed from James A. Harnish, “Stewardship: Now Concerning the Collection...,” www.preaching.com)

Here is an approach I like to take: just preach what Scripture says about giving, laying it out and being honest, no tricks, no gimmicks, no apologies. So let’s start here in 1 Corinthians 16.

Stewardship is not a necessary evil. It is a necessary good. Our giving is an integral part of our worship. Our faithfulness measures our faith.

Let’s look at 1 Corinthians 16:2, our theme for our stewardship season:

“On the first day of every week each one of you is to put aside and save, as he may prosper, that no collection may be made when I come.”

Let’s set up the historical context. Look at verse 1, just above verse 2.

“Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I directed the churches of Galatia, so do you also.”

Throughout the book of 1 Corinthians, there is what we call the *peri de* construction, translated “now concerning.” It’s most likely an indication that Paul is responding to a question he’s received from the Corinthians themselves. You see it in 1 Corinthians 7:1. There he even explains, “Now concerning the things about which you wrote...” In chapter 8, verse 1: “Now concerning things sacrificed to idols...” Or in 12:1, “Now concerning spiritual gifts...” You get the picture. One by one, Paul goes through the concerns of the Corinthians and answers them in his letter. In chapter 16, Paul answers the questions and concerns about the offering, “Now concerning the collection...”

Paul presupposes the Corinthians already know about this project. As we put together pieces from all of Paul’s letters concerning this offering, we know that the collection that Paul is taking up from the churches in Galatia, Macedonia, and Achaia (with Corinth being Achaia) are for the poor saints in Jerusalem. Paul made this collection a major undertaking among the Gentile congregations. He puts it plainly in Romans 15:27. Just as the Gentile churches have inherited the rich spiritual treasures of the Jerusalem community, the Jews, they should, likewise, be a material blessing – a response to the spiritual blessing received.

Turn back a few pages in your Bible to Romans 15:26-27.

“For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. Yes, they were pleased to do so, and they are indebted to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in their spiritual things, they are indebted to minister to them also in material things.”

This offering itself was an eschatological sign, symbolizing the Gentiles’ recognition of Israel’s God as the one God over all the earth. When the Jews in Jerusalem received this offering from the hand of the Gentiles, moreover, it meant that they were, at last, accepting the foreigner – the

Gentile – as part of the flock of God. You remember the Jerusalem leaders had made the request to Paul (Galatians 1:10) that he should remember the poor. Perhaps the offering to the suffering saints of Jerusalem is an expression of those sentiments addressed to the Apostle Paul.

1 Corinthians 16:2

“On the first day of every week....”

This is one of the earliest references to Sunday as a day of worship. The Christian community moved its worship from the Sabbath to Sunday to celebrate Christ’s resurrection. Sunday quickly became interpreted as “the Lord’s Day” (Revelation 1:10). The collection is to be part of the Sunday worship of the Corinthian house churches. The offering is not happening privately, but, rather, on the first day of the week when the church is gathered together.

And notice who is to give. “Each one.” It wasn’t a community gift to the Jerusalem church from just a few of the Corinthians, not the wealthy and the well-to-do alone, but, rather, from each member of the church. Additionally, they are not requested to give the same amount, as with the temple tax, but, rather, they are to give a percentage – that is, to give proportionally in keeping with their income.

In verse 3, we see that Paul intends to return to Corinth. He is asking the Corinthians to gather together some messengers approved by the church who will help take the gift back to Jerusalem. It was a dream scene for Paul to have the Gentiles delivering a material blessing to the Jerusalem church that was in dire need, a church that had given a spiritual blessing to the Gentiles by sharing their Christ, who had come for all people.

And in verse 4, he (Paul) may accompany them, as well.

He calls the offering the “gift” (*charis*), v. 3. It’s an expression of grace. Having received grace from the Lord, now they are sharing a grace gift with the Jerusalem saints.

I. Specific.

From this brief history of Paul and the Corinthian collection, we can see that their gift was to be specific. It was to happen on the first day of the week. Also, it was to be given by each one, not the few. They were to set it aside and save. In Exodus 34:20, God explicitly told Israel, “No one is to appear before Me empty-handed.”

Now, I’m not saying you can’t be a monthly giver or a bi-annual giver or a once-a-quarter giver. I don’t think that’s the point. The point is that in due time, as God gives to us, each worshiper of God is to appear before Him with an offering that recognizes His real ownership of all that we have.

We all understand the concept of a tenth, or a tithe. You make \$400 a week, then your tithe is \$40. But that doesn’t mean that all the rest belongs to you. The reality is it all belongs to God.

In this same book – 1 Corinthians 4:7 – Paul writes, “For who regards you as superior? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?”

The implied answer is that there is nothing that we’ve received that isn’t a gift from God. And, therefore, we shouldn’t boast about our own accomplishments. All we have is a gift from Him.

Deuteronomy 8:17-18 cautions, “You may say in your heart, ‘My power and the strength of my hand made me this wealth.’ But you shall remember the Lord your God, for it is He who is giving you power to make wealth, that He may confirm His covenant which He swore to your fathers, as it is this day.”

Yes, indeed, it all belongs to God, the ultimate giver. Giving our tenth reminds us He is the source of all!

Could God have a lucky day? What kind of theology is that? I’m not sure that the One who is Sovereign over all could ever be the recipient of something called “luck.” But the *Los Angeles Times* reported (February 28, 1997) that the American Family Publishers Sweepstakes sent one of their big sweepstakes envelopes to the Bushnell Assembly of God announcing that God, of Bushnell, Florida, was a finalist for the \$11 million top prize. “God, we’ve been searching for you,” American Family wrote in the letter, as reported by the *Sumter County Times*. If God were to win, the letter stated, “What an incredible fortune there would be for God!” Bill Brack, the pastor of the church located about 60 miles north of Tampa, said, “I’ve always thought He lived here, but I didn’t actually know until now.”

God owns all things everywhere; the Publishers Sweepstakes cannot enrich Him.

Not only were their gifts to be specific, the gifts were also to be significant.

II. Significant.

Each one gives “as he may prosper.” Unlike the temple tax, which was a set amount (half shekel) for every Jewish male, the concept of the tithe (both Old and New Testament) is that one gives in proportion as he prospers.

It’s a long-held biblical principle that to whom much is given, much is required. In fact, Jesus Himself talks about the tithe in Matthew 23, Luke 11, and Luke 18. I get amused sometimes when someone mentions that under the New Covenant they are not required to tithe – “That’s Old Testament law,” they plead. However, if you look at the pattern of giving in the New Testament, it’s much more radical and generous than the tithe. There is no biblical principle by which to argue that less is required under grace than was required under law. What kind of philosophy would that be? In reading the New Testament, givers sold all that they had and laid it at the apostles’ feet. In Acts 4:32ff., we read “the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and all who were owners of land and houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales and lay them at the apostles’ feet.”

You remember which giver Jesus applauds in the New Testament? The widow. Because she tithed? No. But because she gave all that she had. You'd better do a little studying about New Testament giving patterns before you claim the new covenant expects less of God's people than the Old Testament tithe. Grace always goes beyond the law. "You have heard it said..."

You see, the tithe is, in fact, both specific and significant. When Jesus Himself does mentions it, He never negates it.

The only Christians in the world who refute tithing are from the Western world – the "haves" who are driven by greed to keep and hoard. The "have nots" in the developing world are generous above and beyond.

Yes, our gifts are to be significant. In 1 Chronicles 21:24, David says, "I will not give to the Lord that which costs me nothing." God is not looking for the tip of spare change, but for the first fruit of all He entrusts to us.

One pastor asked the question, "Have you ever wondered why dogs like to stick their heads out the window of a moving car? Why do they do that?" The pastor said he'd even tried it once, though it didn't do a thing for him. But he said you ought to see the ecstasy on the face of his chocolate Lab, Carolina. It finally dawned on him what was happening when Carolina stuck her head out the car window. Carolina enters doggie fantasyland. She's thinking, "I'm the fastest dog in the world! I'm running fifty miles an hour. Call me Superdog." And best of all, she can indulge in this fantasy without expending one ounce of energy!

Some Christians are like that. They come to Sunday worship because they love to sing songs about daring faith and thrilling trust and radical obedience. But in reality, like the family dog, they're only there for the ride. What they want is sensation without substance (Victor Pentz, "The Offering")

Until you, by your contributions, have ownership in the ministries and missions of this church, it will never really feel like yours, never really be your church.

There is a third thing about our gifts. They are to be intentional.

III. Intentional.

We must make an intentional plan to give. Your family should pray, ponder, and commit to support your church family. Our giving is not to be based upon our whim of the moment but, rather, an intentional act of worship, devotion, and gratitude.

Have you ever noticed that chapter 16 comes right after chapter 15? You remember what's in chapter 15? The great resurrection chapter – the empty tomb of Jesus – where he tells us Jesus has risen (there have been witnesses) and that our sins have been forgiven. We don't have to fear death. We can declare, "O death, where is your sting? O death, where is your victory? But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

And then chapter 16. “Now about the offering....”

God has made it possible through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for us to have victory over death itself. And our giving, the offering that follows, is an expression of our gratitude for God’s grace.

What about our giving patterns? Are they specific, each person on the worship day? Is your gift significant? If you really tithe, it will change the way you live. And is it intentional – planned, prayed over, and prepared, part of who you are in giving glory to God?

One pastor, my friend, recalls a conversation with his son, a young adult who just started his first job as he entered the work-a-day world. The pastor said, “When I answered the phone, my son blurted out, ‘Hey, can you believe how much they take out of a paycheck for taxes?’ It was his first ‘real’ job after graduation and his first ‘real’ paycheck. Chuckling, his dad answered, ‘Yes, I’m very much aware of taxes; been paying them for 45 years.’ The dad asked, ‘How did you not know about taxes?’

“The son replied, ‘No, I know about taxes, but I thought it was something you paid only when making a purchase. I was just surprised to find out they take taxes out of your paycheck, too.’

“And then the son said it, the words that struck his pastor/father, ‘You know, after tithing, plus what they have taken out for taxes, you really have to be careful with what’s left.’”

The pastor/dad thought to himself, “He was surprised by taxes; I was surprised by the tithe.”

The pastor writes, “I can’t explain why his statement caught me so off guard. Of course, his mother and I, from the time our children were probably too young to understand, spoke with them openly and consistently about what was important to us; that we were stewards of all God had entrusted to us; why we tithed; my children didn’t have some of the things our neighbors had; that ‘things’ were not important to us; that there is a difference between ‘needs’ and ‘wants’; that our greatest delight is found in supporting the life, work, and wide-ranging ministries of our church; that in so doing, we are laying up treasures in heaven.”

The pastor admits, “After all these years, I had given little consideration to those conversations, thinking, frankly, that my explanations of stewardship and the storehouse tithe heard through those formative years had probably created resentment over a childhood lost and the bitterness of a ‘deprived’ adolescence. Yet, there my son was, speaking of a tithe as casually and naturally as one would the day’s weather. Tithing, for him, had become a given, done with no hesitation, without rationalizing or excuse-making, no alternative plan for when he would ‘catch up’ during a more favorable season in life, when it might be more convenient, and no self-serving, dismissal of biblical teaching of the storehouse tithe as being no longer applicable.’

“‘He was surprised by taxes,’ the pastor reiterates. ‘I was surprised by the tithe. For that, I am both proud and ashamed.

“‘God, however,’ the pastor said, ‘does not live with such shame. In contrast to my shortcomings as a father, our heavenly Father abides with the expectancy that His children will act out their lives in obedience. He sees it within us. He is fully confident in the transformational work He is accomplishing in our lives. Because of this relationship, God knows we’re not bound by hearts hardened by greed, selfishness, and the desire to impress others with possessions and positions that can be bought with a price. He anticipates our joyful obedience as stewards, and is probably surprised when we act otherwise.

“‘I owe my son an apology,’ the pastor said. ‘I wish now I had acted surprised about the taxes and not about the tithe.’

“Parents, don’t be surprised that our children are watching and listening, that what you model and speak of in your house will either add to or detract from the confession of faith you make at the church house. It’s upon us, the pastor says, to raise up a new generation of stewards found faithful to the task. Let them be surprised by taxes, but not by the tithe.”