

Sermon 61: 1 Corinthians 16:1-4: The Collection for the Saints

OUTLINE

Purpose
Partnership
Principles
Practicalities

INTRODUCTION

One of the ways early Christianity changed the world was through its generosity to the poor. We cannot help but note the way that the new church after Pentecost, with hearts overflowing with joy and gratitude and the realities of their faith, how they sold their possessions so that those in need had could be provided for. The Christian attitude to the needy was so different to those in the Greco-Roman world. The Greco-Roman worldview valued generosity to the needy as a way of social advancement in order to gain prestige. Generosity to the poor was not a way to please God and a basic duty upon all. Generosity was more transactional where those who gave were to be reciprocated with praise, acknowledgements and recognition; the practice of plaques advertising who gave what was popular. Giving was encouraged when you were giving to a 'good' man in a 'bad' position, to help the worthy out of poverty was seen as good for society but a consideration of the humble poor and helping those who were despised was seen as wrong. Jesus teaching on giving was truly countercultural. Jesus who taught that we should be discreet so that only God knows what we are giving and not do our giving before men; who taught that our enemies and the stranger should be loved and not only those of our own tribe or family; who taught that we should give without expecting anything in return; with a sense of compassion not only duty; who revealed that the final judgement will consider the good done 'to the least of these my brethren.' It is no wonder that the early church were prolific in their ministry to the poor.

One of the ways we see the gospel changing the hearts of believers so that it reflects in them digging deep into their pockets for the poor is the collection of the saints that Paul talks about in 1 Cor. 16:1-4. As we come into this last chapter of 1 Corinthians Paul moves away from doctrinal matters to more practical ones. We will be looking of four aspects of the collection for the saints, the purpose of the collection; the partnership of believing in this giving venture; the principles by which the giving should be done and some practicalities related to the giving.

Purpose

V1, 'Now concerning the collection for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do.' V1 talks about a collection for the saints, but v3 highlights that this collection is going to Jerusalem. This is not some random collection but part of a largescale project that Paul has been conducting where he is going around Gentile churches to collect money for the needy saints in Judea. Paul begins with the words 'now concerning' this usually indicates that the Corinthians themselves have asked a question which Paul is now answering as in 7:1. The fact that Paul speaks with so little explanation reveals that this is something that has been previously discussed. What is this collection for the saints? Poverty was a widespread problem in the ancient world in general.

There was no social welfare; no insurance; no protections for the poor. Paul during his 3rd missionary journey, for about a year, has been going around collecting funds for the poor of Judea. We know from Acts 11:28 that there was a widespread famine that would have created recession like conditions bringing many who hovered around the poverty line into great difficulty. This poverty would have been compounded in the case of the Jewish Christians by the persecutions that they suffered at the hands of the Jews and others. Paul talks about this persecution in 1 Thess. 2:14, 'For you, brothers, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea. For you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews.' Paul knowing the great tensions between Jew and Gentile was seeking to reconcile the two sides with each other through this act of brotherly generosity. We see him getting many of the Gentile churches involved. He wrote in Rom. 15:25-27, 'At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints. ²⁶ For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. ²⁷ For they were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings.' The Philippians were involved, 2 Cor. 8:1-4, 'We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, ² for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. ³ For 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.' Paul mentions in 1 Cor. 16:1 that the churches of Galatia were involved, this would have included the churches in Pisidian Antioch; Iconium; Lystra; and Derbe. This is not the first time the Gentile churches have helped the churches in Judea, immediately after the famine was prophesied by Agabus in Acts 11:28 we see the young church in Antioch raising funds in aid, v29-30, 'So the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. ³⁰ And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.' The collection mentioned in 1 Cor. 16 was no small venture and it features in Acts and several of Paul's letters; this gesture on his part is what led to his being in Jerusalem resulting in his arrest and imprisonment. Paul in speaking about it speaks of it in very impressive terms. He calls it a 'grace'/gift 1 Cor. 16:3 echoing God's grace to us; in Rom. 15:26 he called it 'koinonia' a partnership/sharing in keeping with the union with have with other believers; in 2 Cor. 8:4 it is called a 'diakonia' a service; and a blessing.

This action on the part of the early church, even conducted by the apostle Paul himself puts in the foreground the responsibility that Christians have towards their poor. Paul is practicing the advice he gives to the Galatians, 6:10, 'So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.' This includes looking after our own poor as indicated by the instructions Paul gives to Timothy concerning the support of widows in 1 Tim. 5:3-16. As well as helping our brothers and sisters in Christ in other places. The NT is full of strong commands concerning the poor, 1 John 3:17-18, 'But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? ¹⁸ Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.' We must give money to the support of missions, for the planting of churches, but we cannot neglect our duty to help our own needy. 'The Athenian statesman Aristides wrote the following of Christians living in the second century:

They walk in humility and kindness, and falsehood is not found among them and they love one another. They despise not the widow and they grieve not the orphan. He that hath, distributeth liberally to him that hath not. If they see a stranger, they bring him under their roof and they rejoice over him as if he were their brother. For they call themselves brethren, not after the flesh but after the Spirit and in God. But when one of their poor passes away from the world and any of them see him, then he provides for his burial according to his ability. And if they hear that any of their number is in prison or oppressed for the name of their Messiah, all of them provide for his needs. And if it is possible that he may be delivered, they deliver him. And if there is among them a man that is poor and needy and they have not an abundance of necessity, they will fast two or three days that they may supply the needy with his necessary food.’¹ Christ became poor that we might become rich, it is impossible that those who have been saved by such service will not willingly provide for the poor likewise.

Partnership

It should be noted that there is a partnership, a coordination between the various churches as they unite in this effort. If you are looking for biblical warrant for churches to work together in ventures like this here it is. We are one body in Christ, we do have brothers and sisters in other churches in other areas and it is the united responsibility of other churches to partner in order to help.

Principles

V2, ‘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.’ As Paul moves into explaining how they are to go about making the collection he begins with some guiding principles. Firstly, we see the when of the collection. Paul talks about putting aside money on the first day of the week. The phrase the first day of the week is not a random description but flows from the Jewish mind. In the OT the week was oriented around the seventh day, the Saturday Sabbath. Paul is ordering the week out of this Jewish influenced mindset in calling Sunday the first day of the week. He seems to avoid the pagan name which is associated with idolatry, the day of the sun god and associated with Apollo. Paul is assuming, as was the practice of the early church, that the Corinthians met together for worship on the first day of the week, Sunday. Sunday, the eighth day which is also the first day was the day Jesus rose from the dead; appeared to His disciples, and the day upon which the Spirit was given on Pentecost. We see the early church meeting to break bread on this day, Acts 20:7, ‘On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul talked with them, intending to depart on the next day, and he prolonged his speech until midnight.’ This day came to be known as the Lord’s Day, Rev. 1:10. We see Paul asking for a weekly offering to be taken and stored up by the church, not in the individual’s houses, so that when he came he could conveniently collect it without having to go around for it.

Now it should be stressed that Paul is not talking about tithing but an occasional giving for a specific use. Some have tried to use this verse as a proof text for tithing, this would be very difficult to prove. What about the modern practice of tithing? Tithing we know comes from the OT where a tithe/tenth of what you had

¹ John F. MacArthur Jr., [1 Corinthians](#), MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984), 456–457.

from a harvest or flock was set aside as a gift to the Lord. Technically the OT had three mandatory tithes, 2 were annual and 1 was triannual, which meant that a normal Jewish worker would set aside about 23% of their income annually, not only 10%. It does need to be remembered that the tithe under the Mosaic covenant fulfilled the role of a tax and a tithe because church and state were not separated. The tithes were set apart to support the running of the temple, to provide for one of the 12 tribes, the Levites, as part of one's worship before the Lord, as well as to make up funds for helping the widow, the orphan and the stranger. You cannot copy and paste the OT tithing system into the NT, firstly because it is part of the ceremonial and civil law which does not carry over into the NT; and because it is not commanded in the NT. That said, there is a biblical teaching on the believer bringing a regular part of their income to the Lord. Before the mosaic law regulated tithing there was a practice among the patriarchs where they would bring their firstfruits to God. Abraham volunteered a tenth to Melchizedek Gen. 14:18-20, as did Jacob, Gen. 28:20-22. But from Cain and Abel and their freewill offerings to the Lord we see that it was common for the people of God to worship God by bringing their gifts to him, the firstfruits of their labours. As Prov. 3:9 instructs, 'Honor the Lord with your wealth and with the firstfruits of all your produce.' In the NT we see the people of God giving to share with those who had need; to support widows and orphans; the collection for the saints, and to provide for those who preached the word. Tithing then is not a law but a guide that many follow.

The second point that Paul makes is that every person was to participate in this giving, 'each of you is to put something aside and store it up.' There is the story of a village doctor who was retiring, the town people suggested that as a retirement present everyone should put one pitcher of their wine into a barrel for the doctor. The day of the doctor's retirement came and when the time came for him to sample the wine, he was surprised, because it was all water. Everyone else had thought that they would give a pitcher of water, that would not be noticed when mixed with the rest of the wine. This often happens when it comes to giving in the Church, we reason that everyone else will give so that I don't have to or have to make much of an effort. Paul encourages everyone to give.

Thirdly, Paul tells us that each one should give, 'as he may prosper.' Jesus commends the sacrificial giving of the widow giving her mite, Mark 12:41-44. Although it appears that she gave less, because she gave all she had against those who gave out of their abundance, her sacrifice was greater. But a pattern of constant sacrificial giving so that every time you give you hurt your ability to survive or your ability to provide for your family; this is not the regular sort of giving the bible encourages. Paul encourages us to give as we prosper. Those who have much and give more, and those who have less should not feel compelled to match those who give much. For some, although a tithe is a good guide when giving, some cannot even give a tenth without harming themselves. Paul encourages us to give responsibly by giving according to our ability. As he says to the Corinthians, 2 Cor. 8:13-14, 'For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of fairness ¹⁴ your abundance at the present time should supply their need, so that their abundance may supply your need, that there may be fairness.' There may be a time when a situation is urgent that you feel you want to give until it hurts, that is commendable, but this should not be the norm lest you hurt your ability to responsibly live and provide.

You will notice that Paul's call for financial giving is plain and not manipulative; he does not feel the need to promise riches or blessing. In fact when Paul

addresses the Corinthians again to encourage them to fulfil their commitment to give to those in need he reminds them that we do this because Christ did this sort of thing for us, v9, 'For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.' The Christian loves these big gestures, they are prone to largess and over-giving; the believer loves to imitate the grace that saved them because this is the way God deals with us. How stingy we are compared to how generous He is; how unwilling we are, but how willing He is; how little we are willing to sacrifice, but He is willing to give all and His very self to us. Once grace changes our hearts it shapes the way we give to others, because we have been so well served and so deeply changed this leaves an indelible mark on the way we give to others.

This generosity is graphically seen in the life of Angus McGillivray. 'In Ernest Gordon's true account of life in a World War II Japanese prison camp, *Through the Valley of the Kwai*, there is a story... It is about a man who through giving it all away literally transformed a whole camp of soldiers. The man's name was Angus McGillivray. Angus was a Scottish prisoner in one of the camps filled with Americans, Australians, and Britons who had helped build the infamous Bridge over the River Kwai. The camp had become an ugly situation. A dog-eat-dog mentality had set in. Allies would literally steal from each other and cheat each other; men would sleep on their packs and yet have them stolen from under their heads. Survival was everything. The law of the jungle prevailed...until the news of Angus McGillivray's death spread throughout the camp. Rumors spread in the wake of his death. No one could believe big Angus had succumbed. He was strong, one of those whom they had expected to be the last to die. Actually, it wasn't the fact of his death that shocked the men, but the reason he died. Finally they pieced together the true story.

The Argylls (Scottish soldiers) took their buddy system very seriously. Their buddy was called their "mucker," and these Argylls believed that it was literally up to each of them to make sure their "mucker" survived. Angus's mucker, though, was dying, and everyone had given up on him, everyone, of course, but Angus.

He had made up his mind that his friend would not die. Someone had stolen his mucker's blanket. So Angus gave him his own, telling his mucker that he had "just come across an extra one."

Likewise, every mealtime, Angus would get his rations and take them to his friend, stand over him and force him to eat them, again stating that he was able to get "extra food." Angus was going to do anything and everything to see that his buddy got what he needed to recover.

But as Angus's mucker began to recover, Angus collapsed, slumped over, and died. The doctors discovered that he had died of starvation complicated by exhaustion. He had been giving of his own food and shelter. He had given everything he had—even his very life. The ramifications of his acts of love and unselfishness had a startling impact on the compound.

As word circulated of the reason for Angus McGillivray's death, the feel of the camp began to change. Suddenly, men began to focus on their mates, their friends, and humanity of living beyond survival, of giving oneself away. They began to pool their talents—one was a violin maker, another an orchestra leader, another a cabinet maker, another a professor. Soon the camp had an orchestra full of homemade instruments and a church called the "Church Without Walls" that was so powerful, so compelling, that even the Japanese guards attended. The men began a university, a hospital, and a library system. The place was

transformed; an all but smothered love revived, all because one man named Angus gave all he had for his friend.’²

Practicalities

V3-4, ‘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.’ Paul ends dealing with some of the practicalities of delivering the money. There will be a group of people sent from the various churches. This will be good from a safety point of view as an individual is more vulnerable to be robbed. But the fact that there is more than one Gentile church involved in the giving will also give a united and overwhelming effect to the Jewish churches of the many Gentile believers who are one with them who are ministering to them. Paul talks about sending a letter of accreditation or recommendation, this was the normal way of sending someone who was a stranger to a new area. These letters were common and essential so that people would not be able to take advantage of others. Paul says that if it is advisable he will go. Paul has a bad name among the Jews, he has been persecuted everywhere he went. Paul however does not care about himself and despite being warned not to go, he goes. He ends up getting arrested and nearly killed, but he is committed to seeing this ministry of love brought to its conclusion.

This text acts as a window into the early church where we get to see the practical way in which changed hearts are generous and giving to other brothers and sisters in need. We see the love of Christ which has saved a once group of selfish and self-absorbed sinners transform these racial enemies into committed family to those they have never met.

² <https://bible.org/illustration/angus-mcgillivray-gave-it-all#:~:text=The%20doctors%20discovered%20that%20he,actually%20gives%20it%20all%20away>. 8/28/2025.