

Giving to Meet Needs

1 Corinthians 16:1-4

Numerous Scriptures challenge us as followers of Christ to give financial/material help to others in need. This is especially true when we encounter other believers with needs (Galatians 6:10). Consider these Scriptures:

15 If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, 16 and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and be filled," and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? 17 Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself. (James 2:15-17)

16 We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. 17 But whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? (1 John 3:16-17)

It's easy to read Scriptures such as these and become a bit cynical and think, "How far are we supposed to take all of this? I work hard for what I have . . . am I supposed to give it all away to people who might not work as hard as me? How do I know somebody isn't going to take advantage of my generosity? What if the same people I'm helping today need more help tomorrow or next week or next year? What guarantee do I have that I'm actually helping people with my gifts?" Have you ever had any of those questions? I certainly have.

Those are good issues to ponder. But there are simply too many Scriptures that speak of our responsibility to help the poor to let those issues paralyze us and keep us from action. Today we are going to consider 1 Corinthians 16:1-4 as something of a case study in "giving to the poor." Hopefully this case study will stimulate our thinking and stir our hearts in relation to giving to meet needs.

A Case Study in Giving to Meet Needs (1 Corinthians 16:1-4, 2 Corinthians 8)

An emphasis of Paul's "third missionary journey" was a collection taken among the churches he'd planted for the poor at Jerusalem. There were at least a couple of reasons why the church at Jerusalem needed the financial support of other churches. First, the famine that hit Judea in a.d. 46 that took its toll on everyone. Second, persecution no doubt made it doubly hard for followers of Christ. Minorities in all cultures experience discrimination of one type or another. The Jewish majority in Jerusalem discriminated against followers of Christ in terms of hiring practices and business dealings. And so it wasn't merely a matter of working harder when times got tough; they needed help from believers in other cities in other parts of the world.

In 1 Corinthians 16:1-4 Paul invites the Corinthians to participate in this collection for the poor at Jerusalem. In verse 1 Paul emphasizes that he's directing the Corinthians to adopt the same practices that he directed the churches in Galatia:

16:1 Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I directed the churches of Galatia, so do you also.

We don't have record elsewhere about the churches in Galatia giving to the poor at Jerusalem.

But this off-the-cuff comment indicates that this collection was on Paul's mind wherever he went. As we'll see, Paul challenged believers all over the Roman Empire to give some of their hard-earned money to other believers in Jerusalem whom they'd never met. Here's his directive:

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

Since Jesus was raised on the first day of the week, early Christians worshipped on Sunday, the first day of the week. Paul is advocating that each one of them "put aside and save" every Sunday. In this way giving was to become part of their normal routine instead of an occasional, sporadic practice. It's not completely clear whether or not they were actually supposed to make the contribution in worship each Sunday or whether they were to set it aside each Sunday at home and give sometime later. Either way, attention to giving was supposed to be a weekly habit. Paul wanted the collection to be made before he arrived to avoid any awkwardness.

We don't need to press the point and say that we have to give every single week. But giving should be an ongoing habit/discipline instead of something we do when we remember or when we feel like it. Just like we regularly pray and immerse our minds/hearts in the Scriptures, we should regularly give.

Notice that Paul advocates that they each give "as he may prosper." Their giving was to be proportional to their prosperity. Those who had more should give more. The NT is wholly silent on the percentage of income we should give in the new covenant; it is also silent on where it should be given. In that day churches weren't nearly as structured and organized as they are today. There is the implication in 1 Timothy 5 that churches should support their pastors financially. Most of the examples we have involve people giving to missionary endeavors such as Paul's or to special ministries such as the collection for the poor at Jerusalem. People have different convictions on these things. But the spirit of the new covenant is that we should allow the Spirit of God to lead us in our giving. A tithe (a tenth of one's income) is a good guideline, but some might not be able to give that much due to unique circumstances while others might be able to give a lot more.

Notice how carefully Paul wanted the contribution handled:

3 When I arrive, whomever you may approve, I will send them with letters to carry your gift to Jerusalem; 4 and if it is fitting for me to go also, they will go with me.

The Corinthians were supposed to approve people to hand-carry the contribution to Jerusalem. Presumably they would be reliable people who could be trusted with a considerable sum of money. The gift would be accompanied by "letters" which expressed to the poor at Jerusalem why they were bringing the gift. Apparently at the time of writing this chapter Paul wasn't sure whether or not it would be best for him to be part of that contingent that went to Jerusalem. If it was fitting, he was more than willing to go.

Please turn with me to 2 Corinthians 8. Apparently Paul's challenge in 1 Corinthians 16 was met with enthusiasm that quickly faded. When Paul wrote the letter we now call 2 Corinthians over a year later, he had to encourage them to make good on their promise to contribute to the fund for the poor at Jerusalem. Before he challenges them directly, he gives an example of how the

impoverished churches in Macedonia (such as the Philippians) had given to the same collection:

1 Now, brethren, we wish to make known to you the grace of God which has been given in the churches of Macedonia, 2 that in a great ordeal of affliction their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality.

In the midst of deep poverty, they gave liberally. I'm sure if you asked the Philippians if they could "afford" to give to the poor at Jerusalem they would have said, "It's not a matter of being able to afford it . . . it's a matter of compassion." The dollar amount (or denarius amount) wasn't the thing that impressed Paul; it was their joyful compassion that overflowed in giving.

3 For I testify that according to their ability, and beyond their ability, they gave of their own accord, 4 begging us with much urging for the favor of participation in the support of the saints, 5 and this, not as we had expected, but they first gave themselves to the Lord and to us by the will of God.

Paul didn't have to coerce them to give; actually, they begged *him* for the privilege of giving. With the example of the Macedonian churches in mind, Paul writes this:

6 So we urged Titus that as he had previously made a beginning, so he would also complete in you this gracious work as well.

At the urging of Titus, the Corinthians had begun this work of contributing to the poor in Jerusalem, but they needed to complete it. Notice in verse 7 how giving was supposed to be compatible with the other ways that they honored God:

7 But just as you abound in everything, in faith and utterance and knowledge and in all earnestness and in the love we inspired in you, see that you abound in this gracious work also. 8 I am not speaking this as a command, but as proving through the earnestness of others the sincerity of your love also. 9 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 through His poverty might become rich.

It's relatively easy to compare yourself to other people and conclude, "At least I'm doing more than them . . ." But Scripture continually suggests that we not compare ourselves with others but that we look to Jesus as our example. He is the paradigm of "giving to the poor." Paul points out that "though He was rich" (as in the-owner-of-heaven-and-earth rich, as in cattle-on-a-thousand-hills rich) "yet for your sake He became poor (he humbled Himself by becoming one of us). But the net result was that "through His poverty" we "became rich": because He became one of us and died for our sins we now have the riches of heaven!

10 I give my opinion in this matter, for this is to your advantage, who were the first to begin a year ago not only to do this, but also to desire to do it. 11 But now finish doing it also, so that just as there was the readiness to desire it, so there may be also the completion of it by your ability.

This is so true to life. I can remember times when I've been convicted to give or to reach out to someone, but over time the conviction just faded. Eventually the impulse to give or help was

gone. Have you ever done that? That's what happened with the Corinthians and the collection for the poor at Jerusalem. Paul reminds them that it had been a year since they'd promised to give to the collection; it was time to make good on their promise.

12 For if the readiness is present, it is acceptable according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have.

That's good news: you and I aren't required to give what we don't have; if we're willing we only have to give what we do have. Paul says a rather intriguing thing in verse 13:

13 For this is not for the ease of others and for your affliction, but by way of equality—

It's as if Paul is anticipating the objection, "Are you trying to bankrupt us or something? We've got financial pressures of our own . . ." He assures them that he's not trying to shift the affliction from the poor at Jerusalem to them. It's more a matter of "equality" – those who *have* sharing with those who *don't have* so that they'll all have enough. Such "equality" isn't the type of thing you calculate down to the penny. It's more of an attitude or perspective in the body of Christ that resources should be sent to meet needs.

Of course it's sometimes a complicated thing to evaluate needs. Lots of discernment is needed to know if you're helping or enabling. I understand that it's a complex issue. But the basic mindset is that of the "golden rule": we should do to others what we'd like them to do to us if we were in their circumstances. This attitude is consistent with what Paul expresses in verse 14:

14 at this present time your abundance being a supply for their need, so that their abundance also may become a supply for your need, that there may be equality;

Whereas the Corinthian church was relatively well-off financially and the Jerusalem church was relatively poor, there might come a day when their fortunes were reversed. None of us can predict the future. The most financially secure person here today may need the help of others at some time in the future. The golden rule would suggest that we pursue "equality" – in the sense of meeting the needs within the body of Christ.

In verse 15 Paul makes reference to the children of Israel gathering manna in the wilderness as an example of equality.

15 as it is written, "HE WHO gathered MUCH DID NOT HAVE TOO MUCH, AND HE WHO gathered LITTLE HAD NO LACK."

Equality was enforced in the wilderness. Nobody was allowed to hoard manna: you could only gather a day's worth except on Friday when you could gather two days' worth so you didn't have to gather on the Sabbath. Paul is challenging the Corinthians to pursue equality voluntarily – out of compassion.

That's the "heart" of giving to meet needs. We give to meet the needs of others because we're full of compassion and because we can.

What can I do? Let's talk a bit about application. If you're like me, you get overwhelmed by all the needs in the world. I'd like to highlight a variety of ways that we can help meet needs of others who have less than us. I'll begin with needs here in our church and broaden out to the community, the region, and the world.

Here at Faith we help people who have material needs in a variety of ways. Lots of times needs are met spontaneously as people notice them (e.g., a small group will help a member who's had financial loss of some type). As well we have a "compassion/benevolence fund" to which you can give. These funds are used primarily to help people within the church who have needs. You don't normally hear how these funds are used because we think it's important to respect the privacy of the people we're helping. But please know that your gifts to this fund have been a tremendous source of help to many people.

Locally there are numerous ways to help meet material/financial needs. Our web site has a list of local ministries that we support and in which we participate.

<http://www.faithmanhattan.org/ministries/outreach/com Outreach.html>

Our church provides a meal for the Emergency Shelter on the 20th of each month. There's a lot of flexibility in what you can fix and when you take it to the Shelter. (I hear that they really like frozen pizza!) It would be a wonderful thing if we got the sign-up sheet filled this morning. You can do this as individuals, with a friend, or as a small group.

Sometimes people call the church with needs; sometimes people within the church notice needs. On the 20th and 21st a group from the church will be replacing a roof for someone in the community. Through a generous donation we're able to provide the materials for this project. If you'd like to be part of the crew (or if you'd like to know more) sign up at the curved counter in the foyer. We have another project in the community that is waiting for someone to do the work. A woman called needing some flooring replaced; she'll buy the materials but needs help doing the work. If you can help with this type of project, sign up in the foyer.

Regionally, there are opportunities to help those with needs. Some within the church do volunteer work with the Red Cross and other agencies. Last year a crew went to Greensburg to help with rebuilding after the tornado. Two Thursdays ago a tornado hit the Free Church in Jewel, Kansas; they think the building will be condemned and torn down. When they rebuild there will be opportunities for us to help.

Internationally, there are no end to the needs that exist. Sometimes it's hard to know that your funds are actually getting to the people with needs. The EFCA has relief efforts after the cyclone in Myanmar and the earthquakes in China. The web site for these efforts is included in the sermon outline in the bulletin (<http://www.touchglobal.org/>).

Let me flag one more issue before we pray. You may have such financial stress that the idea of giving to the poor or to the ministries of the church might fill you with anxiety. It's not necessarily that you need more money in order to be able to give joyfully. It might be a matter of managing the money you have more effectively. It might be that you're married and you and your spouse don't think about money the same way. You might need God to do a work in the way you think about money in general.

To help address this need, one of the things we offer is a course called Good Sense. It helps people develop a God-honoring approach to finances in general. It discusses a basic biblical mindset about finances, budgeting, giving, and financial planning. This course could be a huge benefit for you if the idea of giving fills you with stress. Brenda and I are going to take the course along with several others from our small group. Our leadership would like for everyone in the church to take the course at some point. We're offering it on three consecutive Wednesday nights – the last Wednesday in June and the first two Wednesdays in July. Consider taking the course with us in a few weeks.