

Going...Going...Gone *I Corinthians 16*

This morning we arrive at a place some of you thought we would never get to: the end of First Corinthians! There are all sorts of issues and topics that are presented in this first century letter. Just reading this letter from the Apostle Paul stirs up all kinds of questions.

And so, as we wrap up this study, I feel this is probably the best conclusion I can offer to you. I don't know who wrote it, but it does make a point:

I fully realize that I have not succeeded in answering all of your questions.... Indeed, I feel I have not answered any of them completely. The answers I have found only serve to raise a whole new set of questions, which only lead to more problems, some of which we weren't even aware were problems. To sum it all up...in some ways I feel we are confused as ever, but I believe we are confused on a higher level, and about more important things.

In this final chapter of Paul's letter to the Corinthians, he refers to two more matters brought up either by letter or in a message carried to Paul by a delegation from the church. He uses the same introductory phrase:

Verse 1: "Now concerning the collection for the saints...."

Verse 12: "Now concerning our brother Apollos...."

Paul is going to address these two final matters. They are set among other comments Paul makes to these believers – closing comments that include encouragement, admonishment, a dire warning and an expression of love. Quite an ending!

Four things in particular I want you to see – all start with the letter "G." Giving; Going; Greetings; and Grace. That's our roadmap for this morning. Turn in your Bible to First Corinthians 16.

I. Giving – I Corinthians 16:1-4

Paul encourages these believers about a matter that has apparently been talked about earlier. That is, a collection for the purpose of assisting Christians in Jerusalem.

Paul doesn't give details here about why there was a need, but we can draw some conclusions from other places in Scripture that tell us more. There might be several factors involved:

- Famine in Palestine

- There was a sizeable number of widows who were in Jerusalem seeking help to be cared for. It would appear that there was quite a large number of these who were part of the early church. These Jewish converts to Christianity would no longer be helped by food distribution provided to other Jewish widows and orphans.
- This collection might also have been intended as a demonstration by Gentiles of their gratitude to the Jewish church in Jerusalem for the spiritual heritage they now enjoyed.

Paul is concerned that the church follow-through on their willingness and commitment to help. This subject will be addressed in even more detail in the letter of Second Corinthians, chapters eight and nine. But, in these few verses we see several things that are applicable to us in the 21st century church:

A. They were to give regularly. In their case, Paul exhorts them to set aside something every week. It wasn't just – “Well, see what you have left over at the end of the month.” Many Christians only give God their leftovers. “Let me get to the end of the month, and if there is anything left over, anything I haven't spent, I'll give it to God.”

The principle of giving throughout the Bible is always: give first; give the best. Think about the instructions on which animals should be sacrificed – the best, the unblemished. The grain and wine – always the first of the crop.

How do you measure up to God's expectation? It says a lot about our understanding of God's ownership and our stewardship. It says a lot about our trust in God to meet our needs.

B. They were to give systematically. Paul says, “Set aside; store up.” Paul was concerned that he would come and people would scramble to scrape together their collection. And so he says to them, “Do this every week.”

We don't need to see this as the only way to give systematically. Many of us give monthly; others do it with a salary schedule bi-weekly. It is really the principle of giving in some systematic way, rather than a haphazardly way. The point is to develop the discipline of giving, the habit of giving. It means to regularly, consistently, honor God by giving a portion back to him out of the means he has given to you.

C. Everyone was to give. Paul says, “Each of you” is to give. Giving, for God's people, is not optional. I say this with all the grace I possibly can, if you are a Christian, God expects you to give.

In many churches today, there is a lack of biblical teaching about giving, especially the importance of giving. Younger people, growing up in these environments, are not learning about the joy and benefits as well as the responsibility of giving.

We hear the criticism: “All churches want today is your money.” I understand how people might feel that way. Certainly, with much of the showmanship of television preachers, manipulating and cajoling, in many cases just wanting to fill their coffers, I can see how people are turned off about any talk about money.

Now, here’s the real thing: “God doesn’t need your money. He wants you.” The thing that so often stands in the way of our relationship with God is our money, our possessions, our “things.”

God doesn’t need your money; but others do. The church in Jerusalem was in need. And Paul presents this need to believers throughout the region of Galatia, Achaia and Macedonia. Paul says that God wants to use them to help meet the needs of others.

The same is true today. God wants to use us as instruments, as channels, to help meet the needs of others. An article published some time ago in *Christianity Today* captures this truth. It was written by President Pearson of Miami Christian College:

The trouble is, you are always asking for money. You are probably right. But let me tell you a personal story. I had a little boy – my firstborn. He was a delight to our hearts, but he was always costing me something. He needed clothing, shoes, food, and had special needs that I gladly provided, for he was my son. Then one day he died. It was an experience that I hope you will never have. He does not cost me a dollar now. Every need is an unfailing sign of life and growth. Body, mind, and soul have their needs and they must be met continually. A ministry that is constantly in need of funds is alive and growing and going somewhere. A dead ministry has no need, and will not bother you.

D. They were to give proportionately. In verse two, Paul says that they should give as they prosper. Jews who were in the congregation at Corinth would be familiar with the Old Testament requirements of tithes and offerings. The purpose of the tithe in the nation of Israel was to support the Levites who were not given any portion of the Promised Land when it was divided among the other tribes.

Those of the tribe of Levi had been set aside as priests and temple workers. They were to live by what was tithed and by what was sacrificed at the Temple. Combining tithes and other offerings, Jews were expected to give upwards of 22 percent of their income.

The emphasis of the New Testament is on “grace-giving.” The only instruction regarding the tithe in the New Testament is where Jesus instructs the Jewish scribes and Pharisees, living under the Old Covenant, regarding the proper perspective of tithing verses the more important issues of justice, mercy and righteousness.

I don’t have a problem with people thinking of ten percent as a baseline of their giving to the Lord and his work. But for some of you, ten percent is not possible given your situation. God has not supplied the resources to do that.

For others of you, ten percent shouldn’t even been the starting place. God has richly blessed you. As the Scriptures teach: “To whom much is given, much is required.”

Grace-giving is proportional. Grace-giving is giving as God has prospered you. Grace-giving is in the heart of the believer who seriously seeks God’s leading on how much they should give. You see, God isn’t counting the money to see if it meets some percentage. He is more interested in motive. The key in grace giving is not “amount” but “attitude.” It’s not a matter of “how much” but rather “why.”

There certainly are times and situations where true sacrifice is appropriate. But sacrifice is never giving what you don’t have to give. It is based upon giving up something you might have purchased in order to give to meet some particular need.

And so, Paul’s perspective, for these believers in Corinth is that they were to give according to how God had prospered them. Giving was to be proportional. And every one was to give.

Paul wants these believers to be ready with their collection before he arrives. He didn’t want any impression that he would have to come in and twist their arms for them to fulfill their willingness to give. He adds this in his second letter:

Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. – *II Corinthians 9:7*

Paul turns his attention to another subject – his travel plans.

II. Going – I Corinthians 16:5-9

Paul lays out his intentions for traveling. He is quick to add, “if the Lord permits.” He understood that his plans were subject to God’s will and God’s plan. That’s a wise perspective, isn’t it? This really should govern the whole of our lives.

It is wise and prudent to plan. The Bible is never against planning. What it does caution against is planning that leaves no room for God. There's a great passage in the book of James that speaks to this balance:

Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit" – yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that."
– *James 4:13-15*

In other words, leave room in your planning for God – even for God to change your plans. Paul conducted his life in that manner and so should we.

There is an interesting thing Paul says in verse nine, something that almost seems contradictory, yet true. There was an open door of ministry for him in Ephesus and yet there were adversaries. So often we interpret open doors of ministry as being the easiest and most accessible with no roadblocks.

Yet, to Paul these two were not in conflict. Indeed, as you think about ministry efforts throughout the years, opportunities almost always come with difficulties. It is the nature of spiritual ministry, spiritual activities. We should be surprised if there is no opposition. Part of this fact is the division created when it comes to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Another factor is the nature of spiritual warfare as we tread where Satan and his minions oppose.

Paul goes on in this closing section of his letter to talk about people.

III. Greetings – I Corinthians 16:10-19

Paul was concerned about people. So often we focus on Paul's drive regarding mission that we miss his passion for people. He gives instructions how certain people were to be received, to be treated, to be obeyed.

He passes along greetings from other Christians as a way of encouraging them, to let those in Corinth know that they aren't alone, that there are others who are standing firm in their faith and mindful of their fellow brothers and sisters who are seeking to be faithful followers of Jesus.

A friend who sends out a business newsletter had a quiz in one of his issues that I think gets to the point. The title of his particular article was: "It's The People In Your Life That Really Matter." So, here's the quiz.

- Name the last decade's worth of World Series winners.
- Name the five wealthiest people in the world.
- Name the last four Heisman Trophy winners.
- Name the last three winners of the Miss America contest.
- Name the last two Academy Award winners for best actor and actress.

How did you do? The point is, none of us remembers the headliners of yesterday. There are no second-rate achievers. They are the best in their fields. But the applause dies. Awards tarnish. Achievements are forgotten. Accolades and certificates are buried with their owners.

Here's another quiz; see how you do on this one:

- List a few teachers who aided your journey through school.
- Name three friends who helped you through a difficult time.
- Name five people who taught you something worthwhile.
- Think of a few people who make you feel appreciated and special.
- Think of five people you like spending time with.
- Name a half dozen heroes whose stories inspired you.

The people who make a difference in your lives are not the ones with the most credentials, the most money or the most awards. They are the ones who care.

These are the people that Paul talks about: Timothy, Apollos, Stephanas, Fortunatus, Achaicus, Aquila and Priscilla.

In the midst of his speaking about people who cared for them, he adds an exhortation. It's in verses 13 & 14.

I Corinthians 16:13-14

It's like Paul is talking about those who meant something to the Corinthians, and then his mind grabs this bit of admonishment.

“Be watchful.” Several times in this letter, Paul reminds the Corinthians that a view towards the end times are to shape how they conduct their lives. And so, as he concludes his letter, once again he wants them to look intently for the coming of Christ and that they should live their lives in a way that is appropriate for this hope.

Paul encourages them to “stand firm in the faith.” This is a military image that urges them to hold their ground and not retreat before an enemy. Paul earlier linked ministry and

opposition. If the Corinthians live as Christ wants them to live, they will face opposition – internal and external. The same is true for you.

He says, “Act like men.” The point here is that they should counter the immaturity that has been manifested among themselves, causing some of the problems that Paul has been addressing in this letter. As Leon Morris says, “Paul wants them to act like responsible adults.” Paul has chastised them as being childish, acting like spoiled, contentious children.

Then he says, “Be strong.” It will take strength of character and action for them to live godly lives amidst rampant paganism. It takes courage today to live godly lives, to do the right thing, to live the right way, in a world that opposes such things.

And we should not be surprised that Paul adds the most important thing which he spent an entire chapter on earlier – “Let all that you do be done in love.” This, above all, was to be the guiding principle in their lives.

This is an amazing closing exhortation to these believers and so applicable to us. Craig Blomberg writes:

The balance reflected in verses 13-14 between firmness and gentleness, between power and love, surely remains crucial today. Many preach love without judgment; some judgment without love. Scripture consistently holds both together.

Now, at the very end of this letter that he has dictated to a secretary, as was his practice, he picks up the pen and adds his final word:

I Corinthians 16:21-24

“Grace be with you.” This is how he opened his letter; this is how he closes the letter. Paul wishes the unmerited favor of God upon his fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. He loves the concept of grace, the principle of grace, the state of grace in which the believer stands.

But even here there is a word of caution – to those who would deny God’s grace. Did you notice what he said by way of warning: “If anyone has no love for the Lord, let him be accursed.” Pretty strong language.

God’s grace can be perverted; it can be denied; it can be refused. Paul warns against such people as those who not Christ’s. But to those who are the Lord’s, “The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you. My love be with you all in Christ Jesus. Amen.”