

SUNDAY OFFERINGS

1 Corinthians 16:1-11

Father, as we look at the sensitive subject of giving this morning I pray that your spirit would put your words in my mouth and that the Spirit would open our hearts and minds to what you want to say to us.

Today we start a new sermon series from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, but we're not going to approach this series strictly in the order of that book – we're going to approach it a bit more thematically. Today we're going to be looking at the first part of chapter 16 of that book. We're going to consider the question of our Christian call to giving, both in the context of that reading and more widely.

Our reading today may well refer to a letter which the Corinthian church wrote to Paul that is now lost. Apparently they were asking for instruction about their offerings to the poor church in Jerusalem. Our reading from Corinthians has a lot about travel plans that I'm not going to deal with today, but the first few verses deal with their offerings.

Let's start by looking at verses 1 to 4:

“Now about the collection for God's people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do. On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made. Then, when I arrive, I will give letters of introduction to the men you approve and send them with your gift to Jerusalem. If it seems advisable for me to go also, they will accompany me.” (1Corinthians 16:1-4 NIV)

Apparently this collection for the relatively poor church in Jerusalem was a major concern of Paul's during his third missionary tour. He was not only trying to bring relief to the Jerusalem church, but to bring reconciliation between the Gentile and Jewish communities.

He's expressing a recognition of obligations of mutual care and sharing across economic and racial divides – which demonstrates our interdependence – and we need to bear this in mind today. Now the first day of every week in verse 2 means Sunday. This verse has traditionally been used to support Sunday worship by the Christian church – and it is the first piece of evidence we have that early Christians observed that day, but that issue is outside our focus this morning. But, it is worth noting that we're ALL, each and every one of us, told to set some money aside on the first day of the week – the day of our Sunday worship. Let me just say there that many Christians fail to give because they are not present at Sunday worship and don't set anything aside to be given later. But the main idea that I want to focus on is this morning is that we are ALL told to set aside a part of our income **in keeping with that income** and set it aside, dedicate it, to God's work. Never forget that the issue of money was regarded as important by Jesus, 16 of his 38 parables deal with how to handle money and possessions, there are more parables in the gospels about money and wealth than any other single issue.

Now at this point we naturally turn to tithing, because a tithe or a tenth is the measure that most people have advocated as appropriate for our Christian giving. Many Christians think that a tithe or a tenth is the appropriate proportion of their income to give. Tithing was an OT command to the Israelite nation to give one-tenth of all agricultural produce to the priesthood because God had given them the Promised Land and everything they had belonged to the Lord – let me read to you from the book of Deuteronomy chapter 14 verses 22 and 23:

“Be sure to set aside a tenth of all that your fields produce each year. Eat the tithe of your grain, new wine and oil, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks in the presence of the LORD your God at the place he will choose as a dwelling for his Name, so that you may learn to revere the LORD your God always.” (De 14:22-23 NIV)

and from the book of Leviticus chapter 27 verse 30

““A tithe of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees, belongs to the LORD; it is holy to the LORD.” (Le 27:30 NIV)

and from the book of Genesis chapter 14 verses 18 to 20:

“Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. He was priest of God Most High, and he blessed Abram, saying, "Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth. And blessed be God Most High, who delivered your enemies into your hand." Then Abram gave him a tenth of everything.” (Ge 14:18-20 NIV)

Please note the *everything* in this last verse. Although most of the Laws relating to tithing refer to agricultural produce I don't think we should limit the tithing rule in this way. The ancient Israelite economy was almost exclusively agricultural and that's why the rule is limited to agricultural matters. Our economy today is much wider and in that situation I think we should interpret this rule widely – in keeping with the *everything*.

The tithing rule was a covenant obligation of the Law and blessings and curses were attached to it as the book of Malachi chapter 3 tells us:

"Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me. "But you ask, 'How do we rob you?' "In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse—the whole nation of you—because you are robbing me. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it." (Mal 3:8-10 NIV).

At this point we naturally need to ask whether we as Christians are obliged to tithe? Calling our gifts and offerings tithes underlines the continuity between OT giving and our giving; at the same time it obscures radical differences.

Without going into all the complications of the theology involved, I don't believe that OT Law is any longer applicable to Christians *as Law*. That doesn't mean that it's principles are no longer relevant, it simply means that the OT Law is no longer Law for us, for we are now subject to the New Covenant made in Christ's blood. After the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ the tithe disappeared

completely from the vocabulary of the NT church. Tithing is not mentioned in our reading this morning. So, in 1 Corinthians chapter 9 and verse 9, when Paul quotes from the OT to support his argument that ministers of the gospel deserve to be supported, he doesn't appeal to the principle of tithing. Rather he uses another passage from Deuteronomy "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treading out the grain" (Deuteronomy 25:4) as well as the general practice that priests were fed from sacrifices offered in their temples.

Now I'm sure some of you will be rubbing your hands at this point, saying we're being told that we're not obligated to tithe any more, we don't have to give a tenth of our income to God's work. Well, let me tell you it's not like that at all. Under the New Covenant we cannot assure people that if they tithe their business will grow and their investments will flourish as the quotation I read from Malachi earlier does, but we can say that the OT tithing principle gives us a basic minimum guideline for our giving today. If we give generously to God's work then he will give to us bountifully, but not necessarily in material terms.

If you made €500 this week, how much of it do you think belongs to God? Do you think it's €50 – well actually all of it belongs to God because he has given us everything that we have and are. As John Wesley said: "None of these temporal things are yours; you are only stewards of them, not proprietors. God is the Proprietor of all: He lodges them in your hands for a season; but they are still His property." So we need to give to God's work freely and generously and we need to make that giving a priority in our lives. As Chuck Swindoll says: "We honour God by first giving to Him from our paycheck. In doing so, we acknowledge His ownership of everything before we enjoy any of it ourselves!"

Our giving to God's work now should be proportional to our income – as we saw in verse 2 of our main reading. Yet it should also be willing and generous – let me read to you from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians chapter 9 and verse 7:

“Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”
(2Co 9:7 NIV)

In fact it should be hyper-generous – see 2 Corinthians 8:2:

“Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.” (2Co 8:2 NIV)

The practice of designating a fixed proportion of your income to the Lord’s work is not found in the NT. But we are told to give even more generously than the tithing rule. We read of a widow who gave 100% of her wealth to the Lord and Zacchaeus the tax collector gave 50% of his wealth.

But if you have few resources – don’t despair. As Paul says in his second letter to the Corinthians chapter 8 and verse 12:

“For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have.” (2Co 8:12 NIV)

So the differences between Christian giving and tithing are the exact opposite of a soft option. Tithing is but a starting point, a minimum standard. Over and above and on top of this we should give freely as we are able. We have absolutely no reason or excuse for giving less under grace than those under Law were required to give. Under grace we are called to use our money for the church, but also for the needs of the poor and to practice hospitality and mutual fellowship. Never forget that fellowship and food belong together and don’t forget the words of Leviticus 14:23 we read earlier. Don’t neglect any of these areas in your giving. Let’s not forget the Lord’s graciousness to us.

As we just heard, Chapter 9 and verse 7 of Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians says:

“Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.” (2 Co 9:7 NIV)

So our Bibles we are told that God loves a cheerful giver, but that doesn’t even nearly convey the force of the original Greek. That tells us that God loves ‘hilarious’, ‘reckless’ givers, the kind of givers who

like the widow who gave her last mite, give much more than they could reasonably afford. That's the kind of givers God wants us to be. So don't be one of those Christians who stops at nothing in his giving! The minimum standard we should be aiming for is to give in proportion to our income.

Let's not forget that we should remember God's kindness to us, that everything we have comes from the Lord. Let's not forget that we are utterly undeserving of God's gift of salvation – which in his grace he has freely offered to us all. The principle of the tithe was given to drive home that truth into the hard hearts of the Israelites and we need it driven home into our hard hearts as well. We also need to remember that our worship of our Lord is much wider than singing hymns and reciting prayers and creeds. Everything we do in our daily lives is, or should be, an act of worship – and that includes both our giving to the work of the church, our giving to the poor and our offering of fellowship. Our giving is an important act of worship. The act of giving says that we are trusting God with our resources. Also God calls us to be good stewards of that which he has entrusted to us – never forget the parable of the Talents, where those servants who worked hard and used what they had been given productively were commended and the one who did nothing with what he had been given was condemned. Everything we have and are belongs to the Lord and we should be good stewards of these things – we must use our talents productively for God's glory.

Finally, let's not forget that giving doesn't have to be in money. The Israelites tithed agricultural produce, we can give our time and our talents to God's work as well as, money. To glorify God Paul's second letter to the Corinthian Church tells us that we must give Purposefully, Positively, Proportionately and Persistently.

The Lord has freely given eternal life to us at the cost of his Son Jesus Christ. For Jewish families the firstborn needed to be redeemed at a cost of five shekels of silver. We have been redeemed at a far higher cost, nothing less than the precious blood of Jesus. When we give we

are saying Lord I remember that I have been bought at a price. Take my gift in order that your kingdom might increase.

If we understand the truths we have heard this morning it will be our delight to give generously to support our church and those whom our Lord has called to serve him full time. We will be overjoyed when we have the opportunity to meet the needs of the poor and we will make it a priority to show hospitality and celebrate fellowship with the Lord's people. These things are the essence of all true Christian giving. Also remember the 4 P's of giving – we must give Purposefully, Positively, Proportionately and Persistently.

Let's just close with a few words of prayer. Heavenly Father, help us to have a right attitude towards material possessions and to hold them loosely, use them wisely, and give and share them generously. Help us also to give of our time and talents and to worship you in all that we do. Amen.