

“Rich Toward God”
1 Corinthians 16:1-4
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Text Comment

- v.1 The main body of the letter was concluded at the end of chapter 15. Now, characteristically, Paul adds some comment on more incidental matters.

This “collection” is referred to several times in Paul’s letters and, obviously, the Corinthians know all about it. This is the fifth “now about” in the letter and, as we said before, that phrase indicates that Paul is taking up some subject that the Corinthians had raised in their letter to him. They probably had asked for more specific instructions regarding the collection. Paul was then on what we call his third missionary journey. On this pass through the Gentile churches he collected money for the poor in Jerusalem. This was a way not only to care for the poor there, as he had been asked to do by the other apostles (as we read in Galatians 2:9), but a way also to cement the bond between the Jewish and Gentile churches. That bond, remember, had been strained by judaizers and their false teaching who were spreading rumors about the supposedly lawless character of Paul’s churches. Apparently his approach was the same for every church. Each congregation would not only collect money but select some man or men to accompany the gift to Jerusalem.

- v.2 This is one of the references in the NT that indicate that the day of worship for the Christian church after Pentecost was Sunday not Saturday. The phrase “first day of the week” recalls the accounts of the Lord’s resurrection in the Gospels and indicates why the Lord’s holy day was changed from Saturday to Sunday.
- v.3 Paul is clearly expecting a sizable gift.
- v.4 At this stage of planning [Fee] Paul does not yet know whether he will be accompanying the gift and the church representatives. As it happened, he did as we learn from Acts 20:4 and 24:17.

Money and the love of money are problems for virtually everyone. And, alas, they can be problems for churches as well. I remember one of our elders calling on a man once in a nursing home. He was the husband of one of our faithful women, but belonged to another church and another denomination. He worshiped there, she here because the differences in theological outlook were too serious, too great to overcome. At any rate, he was not well known to us but I called on him from time to time and one of our elders did as well. And, on this particular occasion, the man being quite frail by this time, dying as he was, it was a few minutes before he realized who our elder was. “I knew,” he said, “that you didn’t belong to my church, because you had been at my bedside for several minutes and hadn’t yet asked for money!” Churches can commit the same sins that individuals commit.

Money is the most popular idol in the world, the most universally and most devoutly worshipped. Surely in Washington State we don't need to be convinced that money is a god for the population at large, for the state itself, advertising its lottery, finds it entirely reasonable and is unembarrassed to urge the population to part with their hard earned money, part with it again and again, in the infinitesimally small chance that they will strike it rich. Acquiring instant wealth has become the equivalent of salvation in the State of Washington.

Few people, have any ear for the solemn warnings of the Lord Jesus. He said that it was easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven. But, with utter unconcern, people envy each week's or each month's lotto winner. In the real world, instead of the dream world in which most folk live today, the announcement of a lotto winner is made with the slow tolling of funeral bells, not with flashing lights and applause. If only the multitudes could see with a sanctified imagination what Dante saw when he descended into the fourth circle of Hell and saw what became of those who loved money and spent themselves to acquire it in this world.

Now we descended to the fourth abyss,
 Down deeper into that woeful sack stuffed with all the evil of
 the universe.
 Justice divine! What hand could pack together so many torments
 as I now beheld?
 And why are we thus ruined by our sins? ...
 More numerous than elsewhere I perceived on both sides of the
 ring, a screaming crowd pushing heavy weights by
 strength of chest.
 They came together with a shock; and there they wheeled about,
 shouting to one another:
 "Why do you squander?" "Why do you hoard?" And then along
 the gloomy circle they returned
 On either hand, shouting their words of shame till at the opposite
 point they meet again.

But it is not only the worldly who fawn over money and who worship it as a god. Must not every believer admit to the same sin? We daydream about money and, what is more, we worry about it. We worry about it a great deal and so give evidence that we, to a great extent, tie our happiness and our security to money. Further, we show how sacred a subject money is to us by our reticence to speak about it. With an aura typical of religion, money remains a very private matter – how much we earn, how much we owe, how much we have, how much we paid for this or that – like some Highland Presbyterian who thinks it disrespectful to speak of his soul's salvation in public, we betray our reverence for money in the same way.

And make no mistake, this is an idolatry to which the poor are as subject as the rich. As Matthew Henry wrote: "Poor people are as much in danger from inordinate desire toward the wealth of the world as the rich from an inordinate delight in it."

In Proverbs 30:8-9, we are taught to pray:

O Lord, give me neither poverty nor riches,
 but give me only my daily bread.
 Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say,
 ‘Who is the Lord?’
 Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of
 my God.

Well, we all pray that the Lord would spare us from poverty, but surely Christiana was correct when Bunyan has her say in *Pilgrims Progress* “‘Give me not riches’ is scarce the prayer of one of ten thousand.” So, *we can all stand to hear the Bible address us on the subject of money.*

Now, Paul here is not setting out a doctrine of money or Christian stewardship, nor is he instructing us directly in contentment. He is providing some practical instructions regarding a particular project that he was supervising on his 3rd missionary journey. But, though Paul’s remarks have this very specific background they serve as important general instruction for us nevertheless. Therein lies the genius of the Bible. Even its incidental instructions given in specific historical contexts contain a life-changing message for us.

Let me reduce Paul’s instruction here then to three principles. Together they form an entirely different view of money and an entirely different attitude toward it and relationship to it than is common to man.

I. First, we are commanded to give some of our money to God.

That is simple enough and it is taught many times and in many different ways in the Word of God. Paul, here, clearly does not expect them to decline to participate in the offering! That will become even clearer in 2 Corinthians 8-9, when he takes up the subject again. But it is clear enough here: “Each one of you should set aside a sum of money...saving it up.” Not just the wealthy among you, not just the middle class, each of you, all of you. There were, as we have seen, wealthy folk in the Corinthian church, but they were no more under this obligation than everyone else in the church.

Now we give money to God when we give it to his church to support its work, when we give it to the poor in his name, and when, in any other way, we give our money to foster the advancement of Christ’s cause in the hearts of men and in the world.

It is true that we ought to give cheerfully. Paul will ring the changes on that in 2 Corinthians 8. But we are not to conclude that if we cannot be cheerful about parting with our money for the Lord’s sake, we ought not to give at all. The command comes first, the order, the obligation.

I once had a coach who attended the same church I did but he never came in the evening. He once explained to us why he didn’t. He said that he didn’t want to go to the evening service, so if he did go he would be a hypocrite. It had apparently never occurred to him that he needed to bring his likes and dislikes into conformity with his obligations. God’s law comes first, our feelings come later. In fact, there is a special virtue and value to obedience that is offered to God

in defiance of the wishes of the heart. So, while being a cheerless giver is a sin, refusing to give as God has commanded you, is a greater sin.

Giving to the cause and kingdom and people of God is the duty of all Christians. Jesus said that if you love him you will keep his commandments; and this is one of his commandments.

II. Second, we are to be disciplined givers.

Paul makes a point of that here also just as the Bible does in many other places. Paul gives them a plan to follow: a weekly deposit of funds, saving for the day of Paul's arrival. This matter of stewardship, of giving money to the Lord's cause is not to be left to the whim of the moment. It is something to be planned, studied, carefully organized. No doubt there is to be the momentary generosity, called forth by the immediate need and opportunity, the kind of generosity we see in the Good Samaritan for example. But, in general, the Lord's work is to be supported by the disciplined and regular giving of God's people.

In the Old Testament, the tithe was often a portion of the livestock and of the crops and it was to be the *first* portion, the first part taken. Then, some of the crop was to be left in the field for the poor to glean. Giving was planned, it was ordered, it was scheduled. And one purpose of that, surely, was to ensure that the giving of God's people was not left to fortune, that they were not haphazard about such an important thing, that they did not fail to meet their obligations because they left them to the last and too late.

Giving tends to be both wiser and larger when it is systematically done. We all know very well how little we would give if we left it to the end of the month, if we simply gave to God what was left in the checkbook after we had spent for everything else. If we never thought about what we would give to God, never planned to give a certain amount, never took steps to ensure that we gave it in a timely way, we would give little or nothing at all. We are much better off and so are those who depend upon the charity of Christians if we have a plan. Charles Simeon used to say that he showed economy to himself, liberality to his friends, and generosity to the poor. [Hopkins, 159] What would you say is your plan?

When I am preparing young couples for marriage, at one point I ask them to set some goals for their life together and to tell me how they plan to meet them. One area in which I ask them to set goals is that of their finances. Sometimes they will tell me that it is their goal to tithe, to give a 10th of their income to the Lord's house and work. And then I ask them, how do you intend to be sure that you do that? I say, tithing is like family worship. The number of Christians who say they want to is very much larger than the number who actually do. So, what must they do to ensure that they are found at last among those who actually do it and not among those who said they would but never did? And we talk about practical things such as to whom they are going to give their money and when to write the check. When upon receiving income your first financial act is to give a portion to the Lord, you are giving your firstfruits, you are sparing yourself temptation later, and you are bearing witness to your own heart that the Lord's interests come first and must. And when you give according to a plan, a set of commitments you have made before the Lord – to the poor, for the spread of the gospel, for the church herself – you are much more likely to give consistently and generously.

Christian folk should be deliberate givers. They should be spontaneous givers too, but only on top of their deliberate giving.

III. Then, in the third place, Christian giving should be proportionate.

There is some question about the exact translation of the Greek words that the NIV has rendered “in keeping with his income,” but there is no question that Paul means that Christians are to give in proportion to the measure of God’s blessing they enjoy.

This too is a principle deeply embedded in the Bible’s teaching about stewardship and the giving of our money to the work of the Lord. You remember that the Levitical Law made careful provision for those who, wishing to offer a sacrifice to God, could not afford a goat or lamb, still less a bull. Cheaper animals, little birds, could be used instead.

And, of course, the principle of proportionate giving is basically the principle of the tithe. The ten percent varies significantly in amount depending upon the believer’s income. Both the rich Christian and the poor give their tithe, but the rich man’s ten per cent is a much larger sum. As Paul will put the point beautifully later in 2 Corinthians: “...if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have.” [2 Cor. 8:12]

It is not, of course, simply a bare calculation of numbers. The Christian life in Holy Scripture is always a matter of the heart, of love, of gratitude, of extravagant devotion. Christians don’t say: “The Lord gave me x number of dollars; so I must give him y number of dollars in return.” God forbid that should be our attitude. It was not some bare calculation like that that led the poor widow to give up her last two copper coins that represented all she had. It was not a bare calculation that drove the Macedonian churches to give to Paul’s collection, as Paul said they did in 2 Cor. 8, “as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability.” It was not some simple calculation of percentages that led that dear woman to break a very expensive jar of perfume and anoint the Lord with it. These were all acts of devotion, of love, of gratitude, nothing more or less. As Paul says of the Macedonian believers: “they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us...”

A long time ago, a small parish of Scottish Presbyterians were asked to give to a collection supporting the Covenanter army then in the field battling for the rights and freedoms of the church. It was a small flock and poor, but the offering exceeded all expectations. One poor woman contributed eight pounds sterling of the total, in those days a tremendous sum for a woman of her low station. She was asked about her liberality and replied, “It was a [dowry] which I had gathered for my only daughter. The Lord has been pleased to take my daughter to himself, and I thought I would give him her [dowry] too.” [Walker, *The Theology and Theologians of Scotland*, 172]

No, brothers and sisters, it must be more than some bare financial calculation that leads us to arrive at our figure and at the degree of the sacrifice we are willing to make for Christ’s crown and covenant. There should be, there must be always something of this love, this devotion, this nobility of spirit, this heavenly-mindedness, even this spiritual heroism in our giving our money

to God. It is not, after all, a tax, it is not a fee; it is an offering, a gift of love...or, it should be. How often have I recited C.T. Studd to you? "If Jesus Christ be God and died for me, then no sacrifice is too great for me to make for him." Or, another great missionary, David Livingstone, who lived a life of great difficulty seeking to bring the gospel to Africa and died there of disease: "I never made a sacrifice. Of this we ought not to talk when we remember the great sacrifice which He made who left His Father's throne on high to give Himself for us."

So says Paul to the Corinthian Christians and to us, your giving should be offered in obedience to God's law, in a disciplined, orderly, and well-planned way, and animated, motivated by our sense of God's wonderful grace to us and his infinite blessing upon our lives, unworthy sinners that we are.

But, will we do this? These are, after all, only the rules for giving. Will we make the financial sacrifice, if we can call responding to God's great love a sacrifice. Well, the Lord knows the difficulty. He gives us many encouragements. He reminds us, for example, in regard to this matter of our giving money to the Lord's work, "He who sows sparingly will reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously." But the love of money is deeply rooted in our hearts and our society is urging that love upon us at every turn. We require powerful considerations to break the grip of money on our hearts.

Some of you, no doubt, have read George Eliot's masterpiece of a short novel, *Silas Marner*. Silas Marner was a miser, a very ill-tempered miser at that. He lived for nothing but the hoarding of his money. As Eliot described him: "So year after year, Silas Marner had lived in this solitude, his guineas rising in the iron pot, and his life narrowing and hardening itself more and more into a mere pulsation of desire and satisfaction that had no relation to any other being."

But, then, if you remember the story, Marner's money was stolen and the man's life, as a consequence, was utterly shattered. But when he thought that his life had no longer any purpose or reason to it he found an abandoned little girl and took her in and cared for her. Such a strange combination: this old, solitary, bitter man and this little child. But over time, as Eliot weaves her wonderful story, the child changes the man and brings happiness to him and a sense of purpose and fulfillment that his gold had never and could never have given him.

The climax of the story comes when, sixteen years later, Marner's gold is recovered. But now he looks at it in a completely different light. Now it is not to hoard but to give to his beloved daughter who is about to be married. As Silas says to Eppie: "The money was taken away from me in time; and you see it's been kept – till it was wanted for you. The money takes no hold of me now, the money doesn't. I wonder if it ever could again – [but] it might, if I lost you, Eppie. I might come to think I was forsaken again, and lose the feeling that God was good to me [if I lost you]."

Read that beautiful story for yourself and take its lesson to your heart. The love of money will be broken in your heart only when and because a far deeper and stronger love and a far more satisfying love displaces it and crowds it out. Then money will take its rightful place in your life, not as an object of your devotion, but simply as an instrument with which to love God and others.

No one has ever gone wrong with money, no one has ever had money turn his heart, who can say to God:

“Whom have I in heaven but you?
And being with you, I desire nothing on earth.
My flesh and my heart may fail,
But God is the strength of my heart
And my portion forever.”

Job’s friend, Eliphaz, made some serious mistakes, but he knew how to speak of the difference faith in God and love for God makes in a person’s life and the way in which money is put in its place by a living sense of the grace of God. When you are walking with the Lord, Eliphaz said,

“the Almighty will be your gold,
the choicest silver for you.”

Perhaps there are some here who think that the church is after your money. Perhaps you are not a Christian or not really one and it is this cynicism, this suspicion of our motives, this idea that we are mercenary that distracts you and keeps you from facing the call of God and the summons to believe in Jesus Christ and surrender your life to him. Well, let me assure you: we don’t want your money and we don’t need your money. You can keep it all! You come to Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, come for your peace with God, come to find the answers to the questions of your life, come to obtain eternal life; forget about the money.

Now, some of the Christians might be worried that I am telling you that. They may think: shouldn’t he tell them of what a true commitment to Christ will cost them, including what it will cost of their money? No; I don’t worry. You come to Christ and then, when you know and understand his love and the greatness of the sacrifice he made for you, I will be entirely content for you to make up your own mind about what to do with your money.