

GIVE REGULARLY AS GOD HAS PROSPERED YOU

Christian Giving In Paul's First Epistle To The Corinthians

by Kenneth E. Roberson, Sr.

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I. *Introduction.*

The purpose of this essay is to discuss principles of Christian giving taught in First Corinthians 16:1-4. At 1 Cor. 16:1-4, Paul was writing about what might be referred to as “*interchurch*” giving, i.e., principles applicable when *one church* gave to *another* church, e.g., when the church in Corinth gave to the church in Jerusalem. Nonetheless, these verses discuss principles which can provide guidance to Christian giving in the “*intrachurch*” context, e.g., when *individual Christians* give to a church they attend. As we will see, two such principles are paramount: *give on the first day of the week*, and *give as you have prospered*.

By way of background, Paul’s second missionary journey took him through parts of modern-day Turkey and Greece. The account of Paul’s second missionary journey is found at Acts 15:35-18:22.¹ One of the churches Paul founded during his second missionary journey was the church in the city of Corinth (Acts 18:1-18) which, in Paul’s day, was in the Roman province of Achaia in Greece. Like Paul’s second missionary journey, his third missionary journey also took him through parts of modern-day Turkey and Greece. The account of Paul’s third missionary journey is found at Acts 18:23-21:3. One of the reasons Paul made his third missionary journey was to strengthen the disciples whom he had converted to Christianity during his second missionary journey. (Acts 18:23.)

However, another reason Paul made his third missionary journey was to take up a collection for the needy church in Jerusalem, and one of Paul’s destinations during his third missionary journey was, again, Corinth (see Acts 20:2). During Paul’s third missionary journey, but before he arrived in Corinth, Paul wrote First Corinthians and Second Corinthians to the church in Corinth. Paul wrote First Corinthians from the city of Ephesus in the Roman province of Asia in modern-day Turkey. (1 Cor. 16:8, 19.) Paul wrote Second Corinthians in the Roman province of Macedonia in Greece.² Both

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¹ Unless otherwise indicated, Scriptural references are to the King James Version (KJV).

² Three facts provide evidence of this. First, 2 Cor. 2:12-13, and 7:5, indicate that Paul had traveled as far as Macedonia by the time he wrote 2 Cor. Second, 2 Cor. 8 discusses Paul’s collection of money from the churches of Macedonia. Third, 2 Cor. 9:2 states “. . . I boast . . . to them of Macedonia[.]” (present tense in English and Greek), evidencing he was in Macedonia at the time of the boasting and, therefore, at the time of the writing of 2 Cor.

epistles evidence Paul's purpose to take up a collection which would minister to the needy saints in Jerusalem. (1 Cor. 16:1-3; 2 Cor. 8:1-7; 9:1-2, 12; [see also Rom. 15:25-26, 30-31, written to the church in Rome after the collection occurred but before it was delivered to Jerusalem].) Accordingly, First Corinthians offers important insights into principles of Christian giving.

At 1 Cor. 16:1-4, Paul wrote from Ephesus to the Corinthians about the collection he would take up from the Corinthians. Those verses read:

“(1) Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given order to the churches of Galatia, even so do ye. (2) Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him, that there be no gatherings when I come. (3) And when I come, whomsoever ye shall approve by your letters, them will I send to bring your liberality unto Jerusalem. (4) And if it be meet that I go also, they shall go with me.”

II. *Give On The First Day Of The Week.*

At 1 Cor. 16:2, Paul said, “Upon the *first day of the week* let every one of you lay by him in store, . . .” The phrase “first day of the week” is a translation of the Greek words “mian sabbatou” (Gk.: “μῖαν σαββατου.”)³ One well-known Greek New Testament reference indicates that “μῖαν σαββατου” is “a Hebraic expression for ‘the first day of the week’; that is, Sunday . . .”⁴ Paul was teaching the Corinthians to set aside an amount of money *every* Sunday.⁵ This was not setting aside money and giving it to the church in Corinth. This was each Corinthian Christian regularly setting aside money to himself or herself for later collection for, and delivery to, the Jerusalem saints. Paul implemented this procedure, in part to minimize his association with the process by which the Corinthians parted with their money. If the Corinthians followed Paul's directive, they already would have parted with their money to the extent that they had set it aside. Once Paul arrived, the remaining task would have been for him simply to collect what already had been set aside.

Of course, Paul had no legalistic attachment to Sundays as such. At Rom. 14:5, Paul wrote, “One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind.” Similarly, Paul wrote at Col. 2:16-17, “Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, *or in respect of a holyday*, or of

³ George Ricker Berry, *The Interlinear KJV Parallel New Testament In Greek And English* (Reading, Pa.: Handy Book Co., 1897; rpt. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), p. 467, fn. d.

⁴ Fritz Rienecker, *Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*, ed. Cleon Rogers (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1980), p. 446, italics added.

⁵ The phrase “μῖαν σαββατου” is preceded by the word “kata” (Gk.: “κατα”). (Berry, p. 467.) “Kata” here conveys the idea of “every.” (Berry, p. 467; see Rienecker, p. 446.) Thus, “kata mian sabbatou” conveys the idea, “every first day of the week,” i.e., every Sunday.

the new moon, *or of the sabbath days*: which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ.” Nonetheless, the New Testament invests the first day of the week, i.e., Sunday, with Christian significance,⁶ and it is not surprising that Paul would commend this day as the one on which the Corinthians were to practice regular saving for a Christian gift to the poor saints in Jerusalem.

The fact that Paul directed the Corinthians to set aside money every “first day of the week” suggests at least three additional principles which can guide Christian giving.

First, the fact that the Corinthians were to set aside money every *first* day of the week suggests that they, and therefore Christians today, are to put God *first* in their giving, as well as, of course, in their lives.

Second, the fact that the Corinthians were to set aside money *every* first day of the week pointed to *regular* giving. This is not to say, of course, that God approves *only* regular giving. Nor is it to say that Christians should ignore genuine opportunities to help others by giving, merely because such opportunities may arise irregularly. However, this is to say that Paul was not promoting what, sadly, can frequently occur today: irregular, impulse giving in response to tear-jerking appeals from ministries, or knee-jerk giving in response to a manipulator’s alleged need. Paul expected the Corinthians to incorporate calm, intelligent, *regular* giving into their habit patterns. This suggests that Christians today should incorporate regular giving into their lifestyles.

Third, because Christian churches today usually meet for worship on Sundays, Christians can use that opportunity to give regularly.⁷

III. *Give As You Have Prospered.*

Paul taught at 1 Cor. 16:2 that each of the Corinthians was to set aside money “as God hath prospered him[.]” The word “God” in this phrase is frequently italicized in the KJV, because the word was added by the KJV translators and was *not* in the original Greek phrase which they were translating.⁸ Accordingly, the New American Standard

⁶ It was on the “first day of the week” that (1) Jesus’s tomb was discovered empty (Lk. 24:1; Jn. 20:1); (2) Jesus appeared to assembled disciples (Jn. 20:19); and (3) disciples assembled to break bread and Paul preached to them (Acts 20:7).

⁷ At 1 Cor. 16:1-2, Paul told each of the Corinthians to “lay by him in store” and that Paul had given a similar order “to the churches of Galatia[.]” We discussed in part III of *Christian Giving In Paul’s Epistle To The Galatians* various verses in Paul’s epistle to the Galatians that provide evidence that Paul took the doctrinal stand that Christians should not give to those who were teaching the doctrine of the Judaizers. 1 Cor. 16:1-2 raise the issue of whether the Corinthians had been aware of the Galatian epistle and knew of Paul’s doctrinal stand, and whether Paul was commending a new *procedure* to reinforce his Galatian *doctrinal* stand: each of the Corinthians was to lay *by him* in store on the *first* day of the week, as opposed to giving *in the synagogue* on the *Sabbath*.

⁸ Berry, p. 467; Kurt Aland, et al., eds., *The Greek New Testament*, 3rd Ed. (Germany: United Bible Societies, 1983), p. 618.

Bible translates the Greek phrase, “as he may prosper,” and the New International Version translates it, “in keeping with his income[.]”

These verses suggest at least four things. First, one person’s financial prosperity is not another person’s financial prosperity. According to Paul, each of the Christians was to set aside money as *he or she* had prospered, not as *another* person had prospered. Thus, each Christian today should give based on his or her own prosperity, without being concerned about how his or her prosperity compares with that of someone else.

Second, the old saying “Don’t count your chickens before they hatch” is appropriate here. Paul told the Corinthians to set aside an amount as he or she had *prospered*. Notwithstanding the methods used by some ministries today, televised or otherwise, Paul did *not* tell the Corinthians that, for example, they should *pledge* an amount for the collection even if they did not then have the money, and count on God to supply the money in the future from which to fulfill their pledge. Instead, each Christian was to set aside an amount as he had *prospered*, i.e., each Christian was to set aside an amount for the collection based on how he or she *already* had *in fact* prospered. Similarly, Christians today can, first, intelligently and carefully evaluate how they are in fact prospering, then, second, decide how much to give.

Third, even as life has its ups and downs and ebbs and flows, so too the financial prosperity of each Christian is not always constant. Therefore, Paul told each Christian to set aside money *as* he or she had prospered. The amount set aside might increase or decrease *as* the Christian’s prosperity increased or decreased. Similarly, the giving of each Christian today may increase or decrease in accord with such a change in his or her prosperity.

Fourth, Paul, who had been “a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee” (Acts 23:6), knew the word “tithe” (10%). But at 1 Cor. 16:1-2, Paul did *not* say that each Christian was to set aside money *as* he or she prospered, *and the amount had to be at least a tithe*. He taught that each Christian was to set aside money simply *as* he or she had prospered. Whether the amount set aside was less than a tithe, a tithe, or more than a tithe was not the issue.

Finally, it is frequently suggested that, even if the New Testament does not require Christians to give a tithe (i.e., 10%), the New Testament does teach “proportionate giving.” That suggestion would be fine if “proportionate” meant nothing more than an *appropriate portion*. In that case, the suggestion would be that Christians should give an appropriate portion of what they have. But if that is all that “proportionate giving” meant, then the suggestion that the New Testament teaches proportionate Christian giving would not differ much from the suggestion that the New Testament teaches Christian giving generally, a truism.

Instead, when it is suggested that the New Testament teaches *proportionate* giving, this can convey the idea, not merely that Christians should give an appropriate portion, but that they should give a *constant* percentage of what they have. The constant percentage might not be 10%, and might differ from person to person, but each person would give a percentage which would remain *constant* as to that person.

Because of the emphasis on tithing (giving 10%) in the American church today, those who preach that the New Testament teaches proportionate giving (constant percentage giving) run the *risk* of being *interpreted* as preaching that the New Testament teaches tithing (the giving of 10%). Certainly that risk is not reduced when ministries call for proportionate giving (constant percentage giving) and fail to mention that the Bible does not require Christians to give 10% (or any specific percentage).

In any event, at 1 Cor. 16:1-2, Paul did *not* tell the Corinthians that each Christian was to set aside money *as* he or she prospered, *and the amount had to be a constant percentage*. He taught that each Christian was to set aside money simply *as* he or she prospered. Whether the resulting percentage was constant or not was not the issue.

IV. *Conclusion.*

In 1 Cor. 16:1-4, the apostle Paul discusses principles of Christian giving applicable in the interchurch context. However, those principles can provide guidance to contemporary Christian giving in the intrachurch context, i.e., when Christians give to a church they attend. Specifically, we may glean from these verses that Christians are to put God first in their giving, and are to give regularly. Sundays can provide an opportunity to do this. Moreover, Christians should give based on their own prosperity, and based how they have in fact prospered. Finally, 1 Cor. 16:1-4 do not require that the amount given be a tithe (10%) or a constant percentage. Although Paul wrote First Corinthians almost 2000 years ago, his God-inspired insights provide guidance to mature Christian giving today.