

SET ASIDE
1 Corinthians 16:2

Dr. Howard Batson
First Baptist Church
Amarillo, Texas
May 14, 2023

Have you ever noticed that every Sunday we take an offering (offering plate, offering receptacle, online, draft, mail)? That might seem like a strange aspect of worship, but in reality it's the most ancient of all the elements. In the most primal acts of worship, human beings have made an offering to God. Think about the very beginning. Cain and Abel made offerings to God. Think about Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the kings and the prophets of Israel – all made offerings to God. In the New Testament, even Mary, Joseph, and the Baby Jesus went to the temple and made an offering to God. And in our passage today, the Apostle Paul will tell the churches to make an offering on Sunday.

Now preachers use various approaches to broach this ever-so-difficult topic.

Some use the “easy-payment plan” approach. That's where the preacher just doesn't say very much about giving, tithing or money. No one in the pew ever gets offended, and nothing ever happens. Churches of this ilk never do a great deal for the kingdom of God. They never have great mission work or social work. They're comfortable and cozy with the way things are. I'm not interested in a church that doesn't challenge our people. I don't think you are either.

Then there is the preacher who takes the “weep and wail plan.” Oh, it's where the preacher gets up and cries and wails about the financial crisis the church is in. Sometimes his wife will join him with running mascara. That one was made famous by...well, you remember who she was. I don't like that approach either.

Then there is the “pie in the sky” approach where the preacher promises you that you're planting seeds or going to buy your way into heaven. Reminds me of the pastor who got a phone call from the richest, meanest, nastiest man in town, who asked if he would go straight to heaven if he left his entire estate to the church. The pastor thought for a moment and said, “Well, I certainly guess it's worth a try.” Well, we believe we're saved by grace and not by gifts, so I'm not so much for that one either. (This section borrowed heavily from James A. Harnish, “Stewardship: Now Concerning the Collection...,” www.preaching.com)

Here is an approach I take. Just preach what the New Testament says about giving – laying it out and being honest, no tricks, no gimmicks, no apologies. So let's look here in 1 Corinthians 16.

Stewardship is not a necessary evil. It's a necessary good. Our giving is an integral part of our worship.

Look again at 1 Corinthians 16:2

On the first day of every week, let each one of you put aside and save, as he may prosper, that no collection may be made when I come.

Let me give you six reasons that we ought to be willing to give our tithe or our offering to God as a part of our worship, to work with His kingdom through our own church.

I. Through our offering, we participate in the work of God in the world.

At the conclusion of chapter 15, Paul has finished responding to the various contested issues at Corinth. The last one was “what about those who are dead?” And Paul reminds them of the resurrection, the glorified body.

He begins this closing chapter talking about an “offering.” He doesn’t give an explanation about the offering that he is taking up. Apparently he had addressed the offering in his previous letter (the letter referred to in 1 Corinthians 5:9). He also speaks of this offering elsewhere, like in Romans 15.

Because the Gentiles had been heirs to the spiritual riches of Israel, and because the Jewish Christians were impoverished in Jerusalem, Paul thought it proper that the Gentiles share their material wealth with believers in Jerusalem. It was symbolically freighted because the offering would be a sign of unity. And Paul wasn’t even sure (Romans 15) that the Jewish Christians would accept it. But if they did, if the Jews accepted this offering from the Gentile churches, that would be a sign they were also accepting the Gentiles themselves into the church.

Remember, the Jerusalem leaders had requested that Paul should “remember the poor” (Galatians 2:10). This offering was coming from churches in Galatia, Macedonia, and Achaia. And Paul tells them on the first day of the week – that is, the resurrection day (he’d just spoken of the resurrection in chapter 15) – they are to set aside money as their act of worship, a tithe and offering to share with the Jewish believers.

Now notice, he doesn’t just target the wealthy members of the community. But each one is to give according to his ability.

And Paul isn’t going to carry the money alone. He wants the Corinthians to be a part of delivering the money as much as he does giving the money. “I want you to gather up some emissaries,” Paul says. They will go with Paul to Jerusalem. And the Corinthians themselves will place their gift into the hands of their Jewish brethren.

So Paul is nervous about the offering. He’s nervous about whether the Gentiles will give and whether the Jews will accept it.

But in this paragraph about generosity, we learn much about giving and worship and how, exactly, they go together.

Victor D. Pentz, pastor of the Peachtree Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, Georgia, tells a story about walking out his office door one weekday afternoon. He said to the left of the door is a rack where they put printed copies of sermons from previous weeks. When he walked out the door that day there was a big, friendly man sitting in a chair reading one of his sermons. Pastor Pentz introduced himself, and the man informed him that he was the pastor of a brand new church in south Atlanta. "I watch your church on TV and sometimes on my day off I come over here and sit in this chair and read your sermons." Pastor Pentz said, "Oh come on, now. On your day off you come here to read my sermons? Listen, friend, I'll just mail you the sermons. We have wonderful ladies who mail out these sermons. We'll just have those sermons sent to you."

After he said that, the pastor looked down the hallway, which may have been the longest hallway in Atlanta, Georgia. The Peachtree Presbyterian Church in Atlanta has a wonderful and grand plant. He looked down the hall in one direction, then he turned and looked down the hall in the other direction. Finally he looked up at Pastor Pentz and said, "No thanks, I just love to come here and see all that God can do." (Victor Pentz, "The Offering," www.preaching.com. Many of the ideas for this sermon come from Pentz.)

When we give to our church, we raise up a witness to this community in Amarillo, Texas, to the living God who still works wonders. And we show our community and the whole world all that God can still do through His people.

Sometimes I like to look in this beautiful sanctuary, built by those who came before us, those who, in 1929, made such a wonderful sacrifice to God. Sometimes I just look around this room and see all that God can do when His people give in sacrifice to Him.

Sometimes at the 11:00 a.m. worship I love to look at all the different cultures represented in our worship hour, or in the hallways during Sunday School, and think about all that God can do.

This church stands as a testimony, and all of its missions and ministries and this glorious room of worship stand as a testimony of all that God can do when His people are faithful to Him.

II. When we give our offering, we enter into the heart of Christian worship.

In the Bible, nobody comes to God without a gift. In Exodus 34:20, God explicitly told Israel, "No one is to appear before Me empty-handed." The Levitical priest was in a privileged position in ancient Israel. On behalf of his nation, once a year the high priest was to enter the Holy of Holies and bestow offerings upon the Almighty. Now that the barrier has been broken, we, the church, are the royal priesthood. And not just once a year, but Sunday after Sunday we stand before the Holy of Holies and give offerings of prayers and praise and possessions to God, our King.

It is said that when Charles Spurgeon, the great pulpiteer, was pastor, there was an old gentleman known in his congregation as Father Sewell. One day, a meeting on behalf of world missions was being held. Father Sewell was delayed and came in at the very end of the meeting. The great preacher said, "Our brother who has just come in will, I am sure, close the meeting by offering

prayer for God's blessing on the proceedings of the evening." Sewell stood up, but, instead of praying, he began to feel in his pockets. He was searching for his wallet.

"I am afraid that my brother did not understand me," said Spurgeon. "Father Sewell, I did not ask you to give, but to pray."

To which the old gentleman replied, "Aye! Aye! But I could not pray till I had given. It would be hypocrisy to ask a blessing on that which I did not think worth giving to." (John Huffman, Jr., "The Generosity Factor," www.preaching.com)

The offering is an important part of worship – from the book of Genesis to the casting of crowns to the throne of God in Revelation (Revelation 4:10).

III. Another reason we ought to give is that it fleshes out our faith.

It's easy to talk. It's harder to walk.

In 1 Chronicles 21:24, David said, "...for I will not take what is yours for the Lord, or offer a burnt offering which costs me nothing."

One pastor asked the question, "Have you ever wondered why dogs like to stick their heads out the window of a moving car? Why do they do that?" The pastor said he'd even tried it once, though it didn't do a thing for him. But he said you ought to see the ecstasy on the face of his chocolate Lab, Carolina. It finally dawned on him what was happening when Carolina stuck her head out the car window. Carolina enters doggie fantasyland. She's thinking, "I'm the fastest dog in the world! I'm running fifty miles an hour. Call me Superdog." And best of all, she can indulge this fantasy without expending one ounce of energy!

Some Christians are like that. They come to Sunday worship service because they love the feel the wind in their face. They love to sing songs about daring faith, and thrilling trust, and radical obedience. But in reality, like the family dog, they're only there for the ride. What they want is sensation without substance. (Victor Pentz, "The Offering")

Until you have ownership in the ministries of this church, it will never really feel like your place, your church. And once you do feel ownership, and once your faith is fleshed out, you'll give.

The president of Harvard, Lawrence Summers, used to have a saying that no one in the history of the world has ever washed a rental car. Why? There's no ownership. When you see the ministries of this church as your ministries, you'll give.

Put another way, the offering allows us to put our money where our mouth is. Jesus had a saying for people who only talked but didn't walk. "Why do you call me Lord, Lord, but don't do the things I say." It's not what we say we love that matters, but it's what we do. And our giving, our money, represents what we do.

IV. To give is to express our gratitude.

Paul is speaking to the Corinthian church in our passage today about an offering for the poor in Jerusalem. Have you ever noticed where chapter 16 comes in 1 Corinthians? Look back at chapter 15. Do you know that chapter? It's the great chapter about the resurrection of Christ Jesus. In chapter 15, we learn that Jesus has been resurrected, our sins have been forgiven. We can shout with Paul – look at 1 Corinthians 15:55, “Oh death, where is your victory? Oh death, where is your sting? But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ...Now about the offering....”

God has made it possible through the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus for us to have victory over death itself. And our giving – the offering that follows is an expression of our gratitude.

V. Another reason we should be givers to God's work through our church family is that it helps us get beyond our greed.

I want you to notice how Paul tells them to give.

“On the first day of the week, let everyone of you put aside and save as he may prosper.”

He didn't ask them all to give a set amount but, rather, “as they prosper. “ Tithing, by definition, is a proportional gift.

Sometimes somebody will say, “If I had a million dollars,” or “Pastor, if I just won the lottery then I could give to the Lord's work.” If God can't trust you to give out of poverty, how could He ever trust you to give out of riches? The greatest giver in the New Testament is the widow who gave her mite. In fact, Paul says in 2 Corinthians 8, “Look at the Macedonian churches. They gave out of great trial and from deep poverty. Their deep poverty abounded in the riches of their liberality” (2 Corinthians 8:2).

VI. We should give because it gives us eternal priorities.

Isn't it Jesus who said, “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal.” He says, “But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven....” That's in Matthew in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:19-20).

John Ortberg has a sermon entitled, “It All Goes Back in the Box.” He talks about playing his grandmother in Monopoly as a boy. She was ruthless, he remembers. They used to play marathon games that went on for hours. Each was determined to win the battle of wits between two cutthroat Monopoly moguls. As property changed hands, the one with the upper hand would gloat. Of course, the greatest thrill was to put up hotels on Boardwalk and Park Place, and then to watch your opponent land on Boardwalk, roll snake eyes, and land on Park Place. When that happened, you got to watch them turn over their deeds and mortgage their properties, wiped out financially. But no matter how thrilling the victory, at the end Ortberg's grandmother would scoop up the green houses, the red hotels, the huge stacks of millions of dollars, and she'd always say, “Now it all goes back in the box.”

Life is like that here on earth. Life is like Monopoly. We scheme. We strategize. We play the game well, and the money rolls in. You might even have a real Park Place or a real hotel along

the path to success. We might be respected and admired because of the real-life Monopoly moguls we are. But in the end, grandma is right. No matter how much earthly wealth and success we amass, in the end it will all go back in the box. And the blunt truth is that when our bodies die, they'll end up in the box as well.

Instead, we are to invest in the work of God's kingdom, to invest in eternal things – things that last forever.

Paul says as an act of worship, on resurrection day, set aside and bless the church just as God blesses you.