

## **The Cross and Christian Community**

The Cross and Christian Giving

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### **THE CROSS AND CHRISTIAN GIVING 1 Corinthians 16:1-4**

If you have Bible, and I hope you do, turn with me to 1 Corinthians 16. Before we dive into this text, I want to say a short word about last week's sermon. I have had a variety of people ask me this week, "David, are you leaving Brook Hills?" And I suppose this question is based on some of what I shared at the beginning of last week's sermon, so I thought it'd be helpful to at least pause here at the start and say that the conviction I talked about last week has nothing to do with me leaving Brook Hills. In fact, that conviction is the exact opposite. I came back from Asia last week, not with conviction about how to leave Brook Hills, but about how to lead Brook Hills. This is a conviction deep on my heart about how best to lead the brothers and sisters in this room to more effectively and more urgently make disciples and multiply churches.

And like I said, there will be a time and a place to share those convictions. First, with other elders and leaders in the church, and then eventually with the entire church, but the point I was making last week is that putting conviction into practice is not always easy. It's costly and difficult.

And so, all of that to say, I want to be clear that I have no desire to leave Brook Hills. If anything, I would simply ask that you might pray that I would have courage to lead Brook Hills to put into practice whatever Christ is telling us to do, no matter how radical, sacrificial, or risk-taking it might seem. Just as I pray that you will have courage to put into practice everything God's Spirit by God's Word leads you to do, no matter how radical, sacrificial, or risk-taking it might seem. Why? Because death is coming, resurrection is real, and because of where all history is headed.

Now, with that, we turn the page to 1 Corinthians 16, where Paul begins to wrap up this letter that we've been looking at for the last seven months, and in the first four verses of this chapter, Paul talks about an offering that he is collecting from the church at Corinth for the church in Jerusalem. And this short passage gives us a great window into giving in the early church, and principles that should guide our giving in the contemporary church.

And it also presents us with the opportunity to step back and ask a couple of key questions about giving in the church today. So you'll see at the top of your notes a list of five quick principles of giving that flow from the grace of Christ toward us in the cross based on 1 Corinthians 16:1-4.

And then, we will ask two key questions that I believe will be helpful for us to think about together in light of this text. One: "What about tithing?" This is a general question that I hear all the time – are we supposed to tithe today like the people of God did in the Old Testament? So I want to show you a biblical answer to that question. And then secondly, "How do we help those in need without hurting those in need?" And this second question is particularly applicable because this collection in Corinth that we're about to see was specifically for impoverished brothers and sisters in Jerusalem.

In the New Testament, we read at various points about famine that had struck Jerusalem around this time, and to make matters worse, the Christians in that city were being persecuted in many ways, including economic ways. So they were suffering, and throughout the New Testament, in Paul's letters to the church at Corinth and Galatia and Rome and other places, he talks about this offering for the needs of men and women in Jerusalem. So seeing this in Scripture then gives us the opportunity now to consider ways that we as a church can best help those in need around us.

So, let's start by reading this text. Then let's think about cross-compelled giving in general, and then let's ask these two important questions. Sound good? All right, 1 Corinthians 16:1-4:

*Now concerning the collection for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do. On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come. And when I arrive, I will send those whom you accredit by letter to carry your gift to Jerusalem. If it seems advisable that I should go also, they will accompany me.*

Now, you see in verse 3 that simple word "gift" there. Well, in the original language of the New Testament, that word is "*charis*", which is the Greek word for grace. And the reason I point that out is because I want you to see that this passage is not just about taking up a mundane, obligatory offering in the church. No, just like everything else in the book of 1 Corinthians, this offering centers around the grace of God – the grace shown toward us in the cross of Christ – and the way His grace toward us overflows through us into others' lives.

## **The Cross Compels Us to Give ...**

So 1 Corinthians 16 views giving as a picture of grace that we give to others, out of the overflow of grace that has been given to us. If you are a non-Christian here today, we want you to know that the reason we give in the church is not because we feel like we have to or because we have some low-level guilt complex. It's not guilt that compels us to give; it's grace. We are overwhelmed by God's grace in sending His Son to die on a cross for sinners, to pay the price that we deserve for our sin, and He has risen from the grave to make it possible for us to be restored to relationship with Him forever and ever, not because of anything we have done, but solely because of grace He has given.

And so even as we talking giving as an expression of grace today, we want to invite you to trust in the grace God has given you. To believe in the good news that, though you have turned away from God to your own way, He has made a way for you to be forgiven of all your sin and to be reconciled to Him, now and forever. And He invites you today to be restored to a relationship with Him, not based on anything you can do for Him, but solely based on what He has done for you. This is the grace of God, and it's available to you today.

And when you receive God's grace, it will transform everything about you, including the way you spend your money. It's not that once you become a Christian, you'll have to start giving your money to the church or to the needy. Instead, once you become a Christian, you'll want to start giving your money to the church and to the needy, because the cross of Christ compels us to give.

**Give universally.**

Which leads to a few principles we see here in 1 Corinthians. One, the cross compels us to give universally. The Bible says in verse 2, "*Each of you is to put something aside...*" So this is not a letter written only to members of the church with certain economic standing and financial position, where we say, "Okay, some of you who are wealthy need to give." No, this is for everyone.

And we know that in the church at Corinth there were members at both ends of the economic spectrum. Some were very poor, and some very wealthy, and the Bible says, "Each of you should give." And it makes sense: The same grace of God has saved all of us, and so the same cross compels each of us to give.

**Give corporately.**

To give universally, and to give corporately. Now, like I mentioned, this specific offering was for the saints at Jerusalem, and the implication here is that the offering was collected in the church at Corinth. Some believe the language here is talking about each person saving up money at their own house, but based on Paul's instruction at the end of verse 2 that everything should be collected by the time he gets to Corinth, it seems clear that each would bring their gifts to the church, which would then be set aside for this specific purpose. Regardless, though, there's a clear priority here on the church on giving in the church at Corinth for the sake of the church at Jerusalem.

And so we see that giving reflects commitment to the church. Sometimes we have the idea today that we're all on our own in this Christian life, and we each give wherever and however we want, kind of like lone rangers. And it's not that it's wrong at various times for various reasons for each of us to give outside the church, but when you read the New Testament, you see a clear priority on giving in the church for the church.

This is one of the very first marks of the church in Acts 2 and 4, which we'll talk about more in a minute. But from the very beginning of the church, Christians were bringing gifts and offerings to the church, as a reflection of their commitment to the church. Giving is not just to be done solely in isolation as individual Christians doing whatever we decide to do, but corporately, in the church. This is why we take up an offering at the end of our worship gathering every Sunday. That's not just a cultural practice that's a carryover from past tradition; no, it's a biblical picture that we portray every week as we give to the church for the needs of the church, not only here but around the world.

And in this way – now follow this – giving not only reflects commitment to the church, but giving also promotes unity in the church (both locally and globally). I wish we had more time now, and we're going to see this more in a few weeks when we actually look at a passage on giving from 2 Corinthians 8-9, but suffice to say at this point that Paul was collecting this offering from various Gentile churches as a picture of support and solidarity with a predominantly Jewish church at Jerusalem. And this is so important because all throughout the New Testament, we see struggles between Jews and Gentiles trying to unite together in the church. And so over and over again in his letters, Paul emphasizes how giving to the struggling, suffering church in Jerusalem was one of the most clear, concrete ways that Gentile churches could show that they are altogether one in Christ.

And it makes sense: My children know that I love them and that they are part of my family because of the way I provide for their basic needs. I provide shelter and water and food on the table. These things are a clear reminder that we are in the same family, because I have taken responsibility for their care. So in the same way, we show that we're in family with one another by giving to one another.

This is true here at Brook Hills: One of the things that unites us, even in our church covenant, is giving to one another as family. And this is true beyond Brook Hills. We are right now united with churches in downtown Birmingham and churches in northern India and churches in different parts of North America and other places around the world because we are giving to them. Through things like Compassion Child Survival Programs, for example, we are showing impoverished churches across India that they are not alone. We are with them in the body of Christ. And part of our giving every week in this room is going to them on the other side of the world. And in this way, giving promotes unity in the church (both locally and globally). This is why we give corporately. We're not just isolated givers. We give together, and we decide together how that money is used (which is why we'll vote together on a budget at the end of this year). We give corporately.

### **Give regularly.**

Third, the cross compels us to give regularly. The Bible says in verse 2, "*On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside...*" That's a reference to the church's gathering on the first day of the week, and the importance of giving as a part of that gathering. And the Bible emphasizes "every week" here.

Now, that's not to say that if your paycheck comes in every two weeks or every month, that you are biblically required to space out your giving on a weekly basis, but there's a clear pattern here that the Bible expected of these Christians, and there's implications for us today, that the cross compels us to give regularly. We don't just give when a particularly emotional appeal comes our way, or a particular bonus lands in our lap, or on a sporadic basis whenever we feel like we can do it. No, the cross compels intentionality in giving on a regular basis. Even the word there for "*put something aside*" in the original language of the New Testament is an ongoing imperative, which means there's a continuous command to do this: To put money aside to give.

### **Give proportionately.**

Fourth, the cross compels us to give proportionately. So yes, this is a universal call for every member of the church to give, but Paul writes in the middle of verse 2, "*Each of you is to put something aside...as he may prosper,*" which is an indication that Paul clearly knows different members of the church have prospered financially in different ways, and they should give accordingly. Again, we'll see in 2 Corinthians 8-9 more principles along this line, but it's clear that across the church there will be different proportions given according to varying economic prosperity.

### **Give responsibly.**

Finally, the cross compels us to give responsibly. And what I mean by that is based on verses 3-4, when Paul says that he's going to send those whom the church accredits by letter to carry this gift. In other words, they need to send this gift in the hands of responsible members who will carry that gift to Jerusalem. And this is extremely important. I don't have to point out that there are innumerable examples today of money misused by churches in our culture, and we need to be responsible, not just in what we give, but how those gifts are handled and who is handling them.

Just on a side note, in case you don't know, we have deacons under the leadership of elders in this faith family who oversee every detail of how money comes in and is used. They meet regularly to make sure we are responsibly using those monies, and we have consistent audits done in the church as a measure of accountability. And if I could boast in Christ on the brothers and sisters who carry all of this out, those audits are year after year extremely favorable, and I can say to you with confidence today that the money we collect on a

weekly basis is responsibly handled in this church, and we need to always monitor that to make sure it's the case. The cross compels us to give responsibly.

So those are some basic, general, cross-centered giving principles, and I would even pause at this point simply to ask every single member of this church: Are these things true in your life? First, are each of you giving? Are you giving as a reflection of your commitment to the church and as a picture of your unity with the church, not only in this faith family, but in the broader family of Christ around the world? Are you giving regularly? Is there systematic intentionality in your giving on a regular basis? Are you giving proportionately in a way that reflects all that God has given you? And are you giving responsibly?

And if you're not, then I want to encourage you not to come up with reasons why you're not giving according to these biblical principles, but to start giving, now, according to these biblical principles. And to do so not because you feel guilty, but because of God's grace toward you. Honestly and humbly look at your budget in light of the cross of Christ, and ask the question, "What would the cross of Christ compel me to do with the money I have?" And then to obey.

## **What About Tithing?**

Now, as soon as I say that, I know many people think, "Well, does this mean I need to tithe?" And really that question is a subset of the larger question, "How much should I give?" Is there an amount that I'm supposed to give? And at that point, I want to encourage you to be careful, because even as we start to ask a question like this, if we're not careful, giving can slowly and subtly become something that feels more like an obligation than a grace, and I don't want us to lose what is distinct here about Christian giving: Cross-compelled giving. But that doesn't mean this question isn't valid.

### **In the Old Testament ...**

So, are we supposed to tithe? And answering that question leads us to a quick overview of what the tithe is, or was in the Old Testament among God's people. When you look back at the Old Testament law, specifically the first five books of the Old Testament, you see that tithes, which totaled actually much more than ten percent -- it was really about 23% per year -- were given to support the people of God. You see this in places like Leviticus 27:30, Numbers 18:21-24 and Deuteronomy 14:22-23 and 28-29. Now we've got to realize from the start here that Old Testament Israel was somewhat unique, because they were not just a spiritual community like the church is today, but they were also a political nation. And so some of the funds they would collect would equate more to what we would classify as taxes today.

And you might think, "Well, I thought a tithe meant ten percent. So how do you get to 23%?" Well, when you read Leviticus 27:30, you see that God commanded that a tithe (a tenth -- ten percent) of all the produce of one's land and flocks should be given to the Lord. And, according to Numbers 18:21-24, this would go to support the priests and the Levites who worked at the temple.

But then in Deuteronomy 14:22-23, we see another tithe that was taken to support festivals and celebrations among God's people. So that was a second tithe. And then, when you get to Deuteronomy 14:28-29, in the third year, another tithe was taken (another tenth) that would be distributed not just to the Levites but to the poor, the marginalized, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widows. So when you add all this up for the people of God in the Old

Testament, you actually had two tithes given each year, totaling about twenty percent of their income, and then another tithe given over three years. And so the total came to about 23% per year. And even that 23% was not the sum of their giving; it was only part.

The Old Testament also describes firstfruit offerings that were given to present the best before God. We see this talked about in Exodus 23:16, 34:22, Leviticus 19:23-25 and Numbers 15:20-21. Leviticus 19 talks about land that bears fruit, and the initial yield of that land should be given to God. This was basically an offering of the best and the first was to be taken "off the top." In the same way, Exodus 23 and 34 talk about giving out of the first annual production of grain, wine, olive oil, and wool, and Numbers 15 references giving the first of part of any course meal as an offering.

So that was firstfruit offerings, and then the Old Testament talks about freewill offerings that were given to offer excess to God. Passages that talk about this offering are Exodus 35:29, 36:3-7 and Deuteronomy 12:5-7. And these were voluntary contributions above and beyond tithes and firstfruits, and you can read about those in Exodus 35-36 as well as Deuteronomy 12. So when you put all this together, you realize that the tithe, which actually totaled up to about 23%, was just part of the giving picture in the Old Testament. It was a beginning point, a floor for giving, so to speak, but it wasn't the ceiling. Instead, there wasn't a ceiling.

Now, all these tithes and offerings were significant for many reasons, and I've listed just three of them in your notes. They were reminders of God's ownership of all things. God was training His people to put Him first in their lives. Giving like this affected their perspective on everything, because they were constantly reminded in these tithes and offerings that the first and the best and the last and everywhere in between ultimately belongs to God. He is the owner of it all, and none of it ultimately belongs to you. This is a very important perspective.

In addition, these tithes and offerings were reflections of God's provision for all His people. This is how God provided for the priests and for the worship life of His people. This is how God provided for the poor and the needy among the people of God. God was providing for His people through all these tithes and offerings.

And then, finally, these tithes and offerings were wonderful reasons to celebrate God's blessing on all His people. When you think about giving in the Old Testament, don't imagine some dutiful, dreary legalism that weighed down God's people. Listen to Exodus 36, which I put in parentheses earlier, but it describes freewill offerings for the tabernacle. Listen to what it says:

*They received from Moses all the contribution that the people of Israel had brought for doing the work on the sanctuary. They still kept bringing him freewill offerings every morning, so that all the craftsmen who were doing every sort of task on the sanctuary came, each from the task that he was doing, and said to Moses, "The people bring much more than enough for doing the work that the LORD has commanded us to do." So Moses gave command, and word was proclaimed throughout the camp, "Let no man or woman do anything more for the contribution for the sanctuary." So the people were restrained from bringing, for the material they had was sufficient to do all the work, and more.*

Don't you love that? Moses had to tell the people of God to stop giving because they were giving too much. This is the kind of giving we see in the Old Testament, particularly in relation to the tithe.

### **In the New Testament ...**

So, we turn the pages into the New Testament, and what do we see? Well, in the New Testament, there is no specific command to tithe. So there is no place in the New Testament where we see a specific command to give a tenth (or more) like we see in the Old Testament. The closest thing we have is Jesus' statements in Luke 11 and Matthew 23 where he encourages religious leaders to tithe and more, which leads to what we do see.

Yes, there is no specific command in the New Testament to tithe, yet there are many examples of giving that go beyond the tithe. You can see this in passages like Luke 12:32-34, 18:18-19:10, Acts 2:44-45 and 4:32-37. This goes way beyond the tithe, actually. Jesus says in Luke 12, *"Sell your possessions and give to the needy."* In Luke 18, he tells one man to sell every single thing he has, and in the very next chapter, a new follower of Christ gives away over half of his possessions.

When you read about the early church, you see them doing just what Jesus said to do: Selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to the needy. Acts 4 says they didn't even see their possessions as their own, but they shared with everyone who had need, to the point where no one was in need. No one. Acts 4:34, *"There was not a needy person among them."* Why? Verse 35, *"Because owners of lands and houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need."* If anything, when we turn the pages on giving from the Old Testament to the New Testament, we see greater giving, not less.

And it makes sense. Why? Because the cross of Christ compels us to give. If believers under the old covenant, before Christ came, were compelled to give in all the ways we just talked about, would it make sense for believers under the new covenant, now that Christ has come, to give less? No, that makes absolutely no sense. It makes total sense that we would give more.

So, when we look at the New Testament, there are many examples of giving that go beyond the tithe, and there are many reasons why giving might begin with a tithe. In other words, might Old Testament giving -- even limited to a tenth, which we've already seen was actually much more than that -- might Old Testament giving at least be the starting point for New Testament giving?

This is so different than the way we think. We think, "Well, maybe I need to work my way up to a tithe -- to giving a tenth of my income to the church and to ministry to the needy." But why would we think that way? Like, old covenant giving would be the goal, the height of our giving that we should work toward? Instead, we should start seeing old covenant giving as the base, the beginning point of our giving, that we should work from from the start?

And I believe there's biblical reasons why giving like this might begin with a tithe. And I put "might" in your notes there intentionally. Originally, I had "should," but as I mentioned, there's no specific command to tithe, so I want to be selective in only using should for that which we have clear biblical commands. Phrases like "you should" or "you must do this" indicate a biblical command, and those are not present in the New Testament when it comes to tithing. But I think there are many good reasons why giving today might begin with a tithe, and I've listed them in your notes.

First, tithing honors a biblical principle that the Old Testament explains and Jesus endorses. You can read this in Luke 11:41-42. In Luke 11, speaking to religious leaders (and actually rebuking and denouncing them), Jesus says, "You're giving the tithe, and you ought to do that and so much more, all based on transformation in your heart. You shouldn't be limited by the rules and regulations of the law, but you should give out of the overflow of God's grace in your heart, which leads you to give so much more."

So the Old Testament explains the tithe, Jesus endorses it, and I would even add that the earliest leaders of the church, the church fathers, practiced it. Irenaeus said exactly what we've been talking about when he wrote: "The Jews were constrained to a regular payment of tithes; Christians, who have liberty assign all their possessions to the Lord, bestowing freely not the lesser portions of their property, since they have the hope of greater things."

A few hundred years later, Augustine indicated that tithing was still practiced: "Tithes are required as a matter of debt, and he who has been unwilling to give them has been guilty of robbery. Whosoever, therefore, desires to secure a reward for himself...let him render tithes, and out of the nine parts let him seek to give alms." For the first 400 years, the church considered the practice of tithing as a minimum standard for giving, a starting point. So you put all this together -- the fact that tithing sustained the people of God for generations before Christ, tithing was then affirmed by Christ, and tithing seems to have sustained the early church for generations after Christ -- it makes sense that the tithe would be a starting point for giving.

In addition, tithing reinforces the reality of God's ownership. We read this in 1 Corinthians 4:7 and 2 Corinthians 9:9-10. Just like we saw, part of the purpose of the tithe among God's people was to remind them of God's ownership of all things, and this is a reminder that we all need. We need to be reminded, particularly in this culture, that everything we have, we have from God, which is what 1 Corinthians 4 tells us. In 2 Corinthians 9, God has distributed gifts freely, and He has supplied much to us. And it all belongs to Him. God is the owner of everything we have: All our possessions, all our money, all of it is His. We are not the owner; we are stewards.

Which leads to the next reason here: In Matthew 25:14-46, tithing reminds us of the responsibility of our stewardship. Tithing reminds us that we are stewards of another's property. And it's not our job to decide what to do with our possessions. It's our job to find out what the Owner wants done with His possessions, and then to carry out His will. And we are accountable to Him for what we do with what He's given us. Every single one of us will stand before God to given an account for how we have used the possessions He has entrusted to us. Oh, God help us to learn and live this truth: God is the sovereign owner of all things (including us and every single one of our possessions), and we are His stewards, working hard to use every dollar He has entrusted to us to multiply the gospel as we wait until His return.

And this is so critical, because in order to give the tithe, you've got to deal with the desires you have to use that money for something else. So it's not just the act of giving the tithe, but it's what happens to your heart in the process, and in this way -- next reason -- tithing helps us in our constant battle with materialism. We can see that in 1 Timothy 6:6-10 and verses 17-19. We live in a materialistic culture, and we (you and I) are blind to its deadly effects on us as Christians and in the church.

Remember 1 Timothy 6? The desire for money leads one into ruin and destruction, and that's just the desire for it. What about those who have a lot of it? Love for money, desire for money, damns, 1 Timothy 6 says. So we need all the help we can get in a continual,



constant battle with materialism in us and around us, and tithing is an extremely helpful discipline for us in this battle. We are programmed in this culture to think that whatever salary we make, we should live at that level. And so as our salaries rise, so does our standard of living, but that is completely unbiblical. 1 Timothy 6 tells us that godliness with contentment is great gain. So, we should live at a level of contentment, and as God gives more, you give more.

And in this way - follow this - according to Matthew 6:19-24, tithing aids us in our efforts to combat greed in our hearts. We have no clue the measure to which money has a hold on our hearts in this culture. And Scripture is screaming, "You cannot serve two masters!" Matthew 6:21, *"Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."* That verse is a frightening commentary on the contemporary Western church. And tithing is a helpful weapon in a needed arsenal for combatting greed in our hearts.

### **In the Church Today ...**

So where does this leave us in the church today. Pastorally, based on all that we've seen -- and again, I want to be careful because as I've said, there's not a specific command to tithe -- but based on all we've seen, pastorally I want to encourage/challenge you to potentially start your giving with 10% to the church as the "floor" of giving. Even when you factor in the picture of national Israel in the Old Testament, I just don't see any way that New Testament believers should give less than a minimum tithe that was required for all Old Testament believers. Old Testament believers gave their first and their best to the Lord, and I believe we should do nothing less than that. And I believe that for Christians in any culture, but particularly in a culture where we are the wealthiest people to ever walk planet earth, don't we have all the more reason to start here?

So potentially start your giving with ten percent to the church, and let this be the "floor" of your giving. And then, continually expand your giving with greater percentages according to your excess; there is no "ceiling" on giving. Don't let tithing be the finish line of your giving in a way that, once you get there, you're done. Let tithing be the starting block. Instead of working our way toward ten percent, let's work our way from ten percent to greater percentages.

And as the Lord prospers you more, resist the temptation to believe that that means you to need to live nicer or better or more comfortably with more luxuries. Let go of luxuries, sell possessions, change your standard of living, in a way that reflects what we see in the New Testament, and in a way that frees you to give away more and more for the spread of the gospel and the glory of the God who gave you all these things in the first place. I read somewhere: "If Western Christians just practiced tithing, world evangelism and feeding our brothers and sisters around the world would be within reach."

## **How Do We Help Those in Need without Hurting Those in Need?**

### **Helping the needy is the inevitable overflow of faith in Christ and love in the church.**

And that then leads to the second question: How do we help those in need without hurting those in need? This is exactly what this offering in 1 Corinthians 16 is about. And it brings to the surface something we see all over Scripture, and I put it there in your notes: Helping the needy is the inevitable overflow of faith in Christ and love in the church. We find that in James 2:14-26 and 1 John 3:17. Helping the needy is a fundamental, non-negotiable, inevitable part of New Testament Christianity.

So this question is not just a question for some of us to consider; this is a question for each of us as Christians and all of us as the church to consider. James 2:14-17 says,

*What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.*

1 John 3:17, "If anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?" We each – we all – have a responsibility to help those in need. In the words of Augustine in the fourth century,

That bread which you keep belongs to the hungry; that coat which you preserve in your wardrobe, to the naked; those shoes which are rotting in your possessions, to the shoeless; that gold which you have hidden in the ground, to the needy. Wherefore, as often as you are able to help others, and refuse, so often [do] you do them wrong.

And it makes sense. This is most definitely what's compelled by the cross. The question is not whether to give, and to give sacrificially at that; the question is how to give in wise ways.

And this is where I personally, and we as a church, have been helped immensely by books like *"When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty without Hurting the Poor...and Yourself,"* the most recent edition of which I wrote a foreword for. And what I've listed below is just a quick summary of some truths that are explored in far better detail in that book (and others like it) that I would highly recommend. We need to realize that there are many unhelpful ways to give to those in need, but that should never keep us from giving to the needy in helpful ways.

### **Give intentionally: Prioritize the church and evangelize the lost.**

So how do we help those in need without hurting those in need? A few quick exhortations: One, give intentionally: Prioritize the church and evangelize the lost. This means there is a clear priority in the New Testament on helping the needy in the church. And even this has an evangelistic purpose, for in helping one another like this, we will show a picture of Christ to the world.

Tertullian, an early Christian apologist, said: "It is our care of the helpless, our practice of loving kindness that brands us in the eyes of many of our opponents. 'Only look,' they say, 'look how they love one another!'" And so all throughout the New Testament, we see a priority on caring for those in our own household, as well as the household of faith. We care for one another like we care for our family, prioritizing brothers and sisters in need. Obviously, this is not to the neglect of those who are without Christ, but toward the end that those without Christ might see the love of Christ in the church.

And along those lines, we want to give intentionally in ways that spread the gospel to those without Christ. So we don't want to give in ways that are gospel-less – to give in ways that draw attention to us and our goodness – but to give in ways that draw attention to God and His gospel. As we meet urgent physical need, we don't want to ignore urgent spiritual need, which is why, as a church, we give and work with ministry partners like Compassion and Neverthirst and Vapor and many others that are specifically focused, not only on meeting

urgent physical need with resources, but even more so on meeting urgent spiritual need with the gospel. Give intentionally.

**Give wisely: Supplement the responsible instead of subsidizing the irresponsible.**

Second, give wisely: Supplement the responsible instead of subsidizing the irresponsible. So the worst thing we can do for the needy is to ignore them. The second worst thing we can do is to subsidize them. This means we help them enough to get them through the day, all the while ignoring how we can best help them get through their lives. We should not subsidize the irresponsible. Scripture in Proverbs, as well as 1 and 2 Thessalonians, does not tell us to rescue lazy people from poverty. Instead, we supplement the responsible. A perfect example of this is 1 Timothy 5, where Paul says to care for "*those widows who are really in need*," and then he goes on to say that not every widow qualifies for church support. So we need to consider responsible ways to help those in need that empower them for the purpose for which God has created them, instead of enabling them to ignore the purpose for which God created them.

**Give relationally: Let personal attention, consistent accountability, and long-term commitment accompany your giving.**

You say, "Well how do we do that?" That leads to the third exhortation: Give relationally: Let personal attention, consistent accountability, and long-term commitment accompany your giving. So giving to those in need is not just about sharing handouts; it's about sharing life. This is not about throwing your money at something; it's about throwing your life at someone, which is much, much harder to do. It is difficult to give personal attention to those to whom you are helping, to provide accountability in the context of personal relationship, and to give with long-term commitment, not just as a haphazard or occasional event, or as a temporary project. We must be very careful not to think, "Well, I did this event or gave to this cause one time." We often do that at an arm's distance, and then we think, "I've checked off the helping the needy box." No, this is a commitment, an investment, of your life. All of this evident in the way the church at Corinth was not just sending money to the church at Jerusalem, but was sending people to deliver that monetary gift.

**Acknowledge diversity: People are in need for different reasons, so help those in need in different ways.**

Fourth, acknowledge diversity: People are in need for different reasons, so help those in need in different ways. Poverty has many causes. So when someone says, "Well, this is how we should help the poor," they're only showing off ignorance, as if there's a one-size fits all approach to poverty. That's like saying, "Well, this is how we should cure sickness..." as if all sickness is the exact same, when it's not. People are poor for different reasons: Sinful personal choices, unbiblical worldviews, natural disasters, moral disasters, lack of technological development, inequality of power, and on and on the list goes. So people are in need for different reasons, which means we need to take the time to figure out how to help those in need in different ways.

**Avoid excuses ...**

And in all of this, we need to avoid excuses. Excuses like, "Well, I'm not doing anything to hurt the poor." I find it interesting that some of the greatest critics of government programs that end up harming the poor are men and women in the church who do little to nothing to help the poor. May this not be said of The Church at Brook Hills. Another excuse is "But I'm just one person; what can I do?" This is the logic that says, "I can't do everything, so I won't do anything," and it is straight from the pit of hell. The cross doesn't compel such a passive response to those in need, but an active engagement of those in need, using all that has been entrusted to us for the glory of the One who gave it to us in the first place.

Sometimes people say, “I’m only responsible for helping people close to me.” And as we’ve talked about, yes, proximity is significant. For example, I have a responsibility for my children in a way that I don’t have the same exact responsibility for someone else’s children. And we have a responsibility for one another in this church in a way that we don’t have the same exact responsibility for members of other churches. But this does not mean that we then turn a deaf ear to those outside of our family, or our faith family.

To be blunt, we have brothers and sisters in Christ who are starving – and their kids are starving – around the world right now, and physical distance from them doesn’t necessitate spiritual isolation from them. For that matter, we can’t use this excuse even in this city, thinking, “Well, if the needs aren’t in my immediate community, then they’re not my problem,” which we would never say, but this is exactly what we have said through trends that have seen our families flee impoverished urban environments to isolate ourselves in prosperous suburban neighborhoods, where we can hide safely behind our gates, a world away from the needs, challenges, and dangers of the inner city. This is one of the true tragedies of church life in Birmingham, Alabama, where there is such a marked distinction between those who live over the mountain, and those who don’t. And this must change. Brothers and sisters in The Church at Brook Hills, this must change.

Now many of you know that about four years ago, when we started what became known as “The Radical Experiment”, we said, “We want this to change.” And we began focusing on urgent spiritual and physical need in our city in a way we had not done before. Some of our brothers and sisters sold their homes in suburbia and moved into more inner city communities, and we began an intentional, relational, long-term commitment as a church to serve and work together with churches and ministries in downtown Birmingham, specifically the areas around East Lake and Gate City. And I am so grateful for what so many of you have done, and are doing even now. Yesterday, some of you helped out at a Fall Festival in Mark’s Village. But today I want to call us to a whole new level of ministry along these lines.

Keith Stanley, who has been leading us in these efforts, has been working literally for the last few years on a ministry that we are now helping to start here in the city called “WorkFaith Birmingham.” After years of ministry in the urban areas of Birmingham – with all the needs that are represented there and all the causes behind those needs, whether that’s drug lords, slumlords, all kinds of predators, urban flight, racism, transportation challenges, fractured families, inferior educational systems, bad social policies, sinful personal choices, and on and on and on, and after years of studying and exploring ministries in urban centers around our country, we have come to the conclusion that the best avenue we can take as the church for addressing urgent spiritual and physical need in Birmingham is through gospel-centered job preparation and placement, which allows for gospel-saturated mentorship to take place.

Now I know that’s a mouth-full, and there are many more details that I don’t have time to go into now, but simply envision a jobs initiative that is helping unemployed adults to get and keep jobs, to develop a biblical work ethic alongside a biblical worldview, and to move toward becoming homeowners and stakeholders in their community, all in the context of relationship with someone who knows and cares about their deepest needs in the gospel. And the goal is to mobilize men and women across this church, and across other churches in Birmingham that we’re already partnering together with, to invest in these kinds of relationships. As we set up training workshops and job placement processes and programs, the greatest need will be men and women in the church who will be willing to mentor one person, to walk alongside that one person, sharing and showing them the gospel every step of the way.

And so I want to call workers all across this faith family, particularly men and women in the marketplace, in business, in all areas of work, to be a part of this. There is more information on the front cover of your Worship Guide, including details about two informational meetings that are coming up on November 3 and December 1. And I want to challenge you today, particularly in light of this text, to be at one of those meetings and to find out how you can be a part of addressing this major need in our city. We cannot be content to sit on this side of the mountain and do nothing.

And I want to be careful, even in saying that, and even in couching all of this, because I don't want us to get the picture, the idea that we are saviors coming in from wealthy over the mountain to help poor sinners in need. No, we are all poor sinners in need, every single one of us. We can try to mask it all day long with nice cars and big houses and comfortable lives, but at the core, we all have the same need – the need for God to reach down His hand of mercy into our impoverished hearts and to give us hope, and He has done that. He has done that in you, and He has done that in me at our deepest point of need.

So then it just makes sense for us, in our need, to go to others in their need, to give our lives, to take risks, to spend time, to make sacrifices in order to point others in their need to the only One who can meet that need. That is what this is all about.

And so I share all of this for the first time with our faith family today. This has been shared with elders and our financial team and other leaders in the church, and we are all on board in saying we want to make this work. And like I mentioned, we're already gathering together churches and leaders across our city toward this end, but today, I'm saying to the individual brothers and sisters who make up The Church at Brook Hills. May the cross of Christ compel many of you to action in this way. This is why, when you look at our church covenant, what we have committed to one another – and I put a portion of it here at the end of your notes – this why we say that as members of The Church at Brook Hills, having been brought by divine grace to repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and to surrender our lives to Him,

"We will give cheerfully and generously to the support of the church, the relief of the poor, and the spread of the gospel through all nations."

This is just as we see patterned in the early church in 1 Corinthians 16. And it is ultimately because we're compelled by the cross of our King.

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