

Lessons from a Special Offering

1 Corinthians

By Richard Caldwell, Jr.

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Bible Text: 1 Corinthians 16:1-4

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Founders Baptist Church

24724 Aldine Westfield

Spring TX 77373

Website: www.foundersbaptist.org

Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/smbconline

Good evening. It is good to see you tonight. If you would, please look to the book of 1 Corinthians chapter 16 and we read beginning with the first verse down to verse four.

Paul writes:

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.¹

Let's go the Lord together in prayer.

Father in heaven, I thank you for the opportunity I have tonight to be with my brothers and sisters in worship. We thank you for your Word and the sufficiency, Lord, of your Word to accomplish in our lives that which you desire to do in us. We ask that tonight, Lord, you would watch over this time of preaching and make it effective that, Lord, you would watch over it in such a way that I would say nothing that would grieve your Spirit or not be good for your Church, but, Lord, rather, instead, there would be that experience in this hour and in this place where we know what it is to have your Word powerfully affect our lives. We look, Lord, to the working of your Spirit for this. We thank you that you are here with us. We thank you that you teach us your Word. And, Lord, we will thank you for what you accomplish in our hearts tonight. We pray for anyone in our midst who doesn't know you. Our desire and our request, Lord, is for their salvation. Lord, we desire to see sinners saved, not only in a worship service like this one, but through the witness of our people here. So, Lord, just continue to give us an increased burden for lost people and give us opportunity and then, Lord, give us ability to share your gospel with them. So, Lord, we ask your blessing tonight. We will thank you for what you do in Jesus' name. Amen.

¹ 1 Corinthians 16:1-4.

Well, I have said it often. You have heard me say it often. We never leave the gospel behind. If you think of the gospel only in terms of a message by which you were introduced to Jesus, if you think of the gospel only as sort of the introductory message to salvation, then we have underestimated what the gospel is. The good news is literally everything that God has revealed about himself. It is everything that God has revealed concerning his Son, the wholeness of the Christian message. That is the gospel.

And certainly by the gospel we are introduced to Christ, but it is also by the gospel that we continue to walk with Christ. We live our lives out of the gospel. We live our lives as we practice the gospel. Christian living is the application of gospel truth, living in light of gospel reality every day so that every day in every area of our lives, we are to be living our lives with a gospel perspective.

Now that is not just true when we are talking about doctrinal matters, when we are talking about, you know, matters of moral uprightness. This is also true when we are talking about very practical matters. I mean, even when we talk about the most practical matters in our lives as individual believers and the most practical matters as a local church, even there we are to live our lives in a distinctive way, in a way that says we believe the gospel. We see that when we come to 1 Corinthians chapter 16.

Paul is answering another question that the Corinthians have. You notice the formula he begins with, verse one.

“Now concerning the collection for the saints...”²

He has used this same language in chapter seven verse one when he said:

“Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: ‘It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.’”³ And on he goes.

1 Corinthians 7:25.

“Now concerning the betrothed...”⁴

1 Corinthians 8:1.

“Now concerning food offered to idols...”⁵

1 Corinthians 12:1.

“Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers...”⁶

² 1 Corinthians 16:1.

³ 1 Corinthians 7:1.

⁴ 1 Corinthians 7:25.

⁵ 1 Corinthians 8:1.

⁶ 1 Corinthians 12:1.

So that Paul is just answering their questions one by one as he goes through the rest of this letter. He is answering the things that they have asked about. The very way that he just sort of launches into this information about an offering that he is collecting says that he has already communicated with them about it. They already have some knowledge of this offering that he is collecting. But they had some questions about it. And they have written to him about it. And now he takes up the issue in chapter 16 verse one concerning this collection. You have asked about it. Now I am going to give you some information.

What Paul is doing here is very practical. He is leading the churches in the collection of an offering to relieve poor believers in Jerusalem. You notice he says in verse three:

“And when I arrive, I will send those whom you accredit by letter to carry your gift to Jerusalem.”⁷

This is an offering for poor saints in Jerusalem.

By the way, he has gathered offerings like this more than once. Why are these people poor? Well, we learn from the book of Acts there was a famine that had been experienced by these people in the region some years before. They were still suffering from that, Acts chapter 11 verses 25 through 30. No doubt some of these people were poor due to persecution, imprisonment, displacement. Some of them, perhaps, are even experiencing hard times materially because they sacrificed materially, Acts chapter two, as they even sold houses and lands to provide for brand new believers who wanted to stay in Jerusalem. So they have impoverished themselves by giving what they had away and now they are left in a state where they need help.

For all these reasons and perhaps even more, Paul has been going to the churches and he has been planning and now he is gathering this offering and he is going to take it to Jerusalem or he is going to make sure that it gets there and offer help to these poor saints.

This is something very practical. And yet the way that he speaks of it and the way that he looks at it and the way that he handles it in a very distinctive way says, “This is being carried out with a gospel perspective. And that is what I want us to think about tonight.

There are three main points I want to share with you. The first one is this.

Coordinated action can demonstrate the gospel. Coordinated action, or we might even say cooperative activity can demonstrate the gospel.

First let’s think about this project in an overall sense. This offering is clearly very important to the apostle Paul. It is seen as important not only by the fact that he initiates this among the churches, but when you get to the letter of 2 Corinthians you discover that

⁷ 1 Corinthians 16:3.

as the Corinthians begin to lag behind, as it seems like they are not going to finish what they started, Paul also takes steps to make sure that this gets completed.

2 Corinthians chapter eight verse six says this:

Accordingly, we urged Titus that as he had started, so he should complete among you this act of grace.

But as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in our love for you—see that you excel in this act of grace also. I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich. And in this matter I give my judgment: this benefits you, who a year ago started not only to do this work but also to desire to do it. So now finish doing it as well, so that your readiness in desiring it may be matched by your completing it out of what you have.⁸

Paul is saying, “Look. You started this. You wanted to do it. You were desirous of it. But now you are lagging behind. Finish what you started. And as you finish it, look to our Savior, look to the Lord Jesus himself, who...”

“...though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.”⁹

There is that gospel motivation for something very practical. Paul is going to all the churches. He wants them to cooperate together. He wants this to be a coordinated action. Why? Why is this so important that he would start it, that he would see that it gets finished? Why is this important to him?

Well, one reason we can say is, it is just simply Christian love. It is just a simple act of Christian love.

The book of 1 John puts it this way, 1 John 3:17:

“But 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?”¹⁰

If we can see a brother in need and we have the ability to meet that need and we can see the need and walk away from it and act like we didn’t see it, so we close our heart, John asks, “How does the love of God abide in a heart like that?”

⁸ 2 Corinthians 8:6-11.

⁹ 2 Corinthians 8:9.

¹⁰ 1 John 3:17.

Now where the love of God abides and I see a brother or a sister in need and I have the ability to meet that need, the love of God says, "Let me meet that need. Let me see how I can be of help in meeting that need."

Well, when you see a suffering group of Christians in the city of Jerusalem and there is the opportunity among these churches to take up an offering to meet the need of your brothers, well, Christian love says, "Let's do it."

So one great thing coming out of this offering is as all of these churches cooperate together to meet the needs of a group of Christians living in a particular area as they all cooperate together, what is being put on display? The gospel is being put on display. Christian love is being put on display. The reality of conversion and the kind of love that abides in converted hearts. That is being put on display. The love of Christ even as he exhorts us, 2 Corinthians eight, the very love that would cause Jesus to sacrifice his riches to meet us in our poverty, that very kind of love is being put on display through an offering like this.

So it is a simple act of Christian love. That is one reason this was important to him. But no doubt there is something else operating here also and that his it is also a symbolic act of Christian unity, because for years and year and years there was this dividing wall between Jews and Gentiles. And Paul has been preaching the mystery of the Church, that in the Church you have a new man, no longer Jew and Gentile, no longer slave or free, but one new man in Christ Jesus and Christ, by virtue of his death on the cross tore down that dividing wall of partition and now Jew and Gentile stand on the same ground in Jesus Christ and they are brothers. And here is the opportunity for these churches in Galatia and the Church in Corinth and other churches, the Church in Rome, here is the opportunity of these churches made up primarily of Gentile believers in a tangible way to express their love for their Jewish brothers in Christ.

I believe this is one of the real motivating factors in Paul's heart as he initiates this among the Gentile churches, as he says to them, "Let's finish this up. Let's take a great offering to Jerusalem."

I think he...

And, by the way, I am not going to... I will get there a little bit later. But do you notice he says, "And I want you to send messengers"? Do you see that? He says in verse three:

"And when I arrive, I will send those whom you accredit by letter to carry your gift to Jerusalem."¹¹

So they are to select ambassadors to go from their church with the gift. Look. Paul envisions this picture where standing there with this material, tangible expression of the love of God are human beings who have been saved by the grace of God and they are

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 16:3.

saying, “Here we are. We are not just giving you our money. We are giving you ourselves.”

What an act. What a picture of Christian unity. What a picture of the gospel? So there is a principle here. Cooperative effort among believers, coordinated action can be—and in this case was—a demonstration of the gospel. Christian love was being demonstrated and Christian unity was being demonstrated.

There is a second principle we see in verses one through four. We can state it this way. Corporate responsibility demonstrates the gospel. It is true enough to say Paul initiates this coordinated action, this coordinated or cooperative action, but we might ask, “Well, why should the Corinthian Church want to participate? Why should the churches in Galatia want to participate? Why should the Church at Rome want to participate? Why should the individual believers in the Corinthian believers want to participate? Because in the family of God there is mutual responsibility. And when I began to recognize that, when you begin to recognize that we have a responsibility, not just an opportunity, but a responsibility toward one another that we have a God given responsibility toward other believers, as we begin to recognize that and think that way and live that way the gospel is put on display.

In the New Testament you see this sense of responsibility showing up in more than one way. We need to experience all three of the ways that I am going to mention. First of all, there is a general responsibility toward one another just because we are in the same family. Won't you look at 2 Corinthians chapter eight? Notice how he stresses this aspect of it to them in his second letter.

2 Corinthians chapter eight. And I don't know. The way that he words this, maybe the Corinthians even at some point thought that they were being asked to do more than some other churches. Notice what he says to them here, verse 13.

“I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of fairness your abundance at the present time should supply their need.”¹²

Do you see the picture? Right now you are blessed, man. I mean God has really given you an abundance. And the people for whom we are gathering this offering, they have a real need.

Now guess what? That imparts a responsibility to you. That is what he is saying. It is a matter of fairness that your abundance at the present time should supply their need. Look on into verse 14. “... so that their abundance may supply your need, that there may be fairness.”¹³

Do you ever stop and think about that? That in the family of God there will be times when you have abundance and a brother doesn't. And God gives you not only the

¹² 2 Corinthians 8:13-14.

¹³ 2 Corinthians 8:14.

opportunity, but by virtue of you recognizing the need, you now have a responsibility to help meet that need. And then some time down the road it may be that very same brother you have helped who has abundance when you meet with your time of need. And if they recognize that same sense of family responsibility in the family of God, this is a God ordained way of taking care of his people. Mutual concern, mutual love.

Look at verse 15.

“As it is written...”

He appeals to Scripture on this.

“Whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack.”¹⁴

Isn't it a blight on us? Now I am not talking about... because the Word of God addresses this in another place. We are not talking about supporting people who won't work, right? If a man doesn't work, don't let him eat. We are to teach responsibility in the family of God. But isn't it a blight on the Church when he have people with abundance, I mean, they are storing it up in their barns, while you have a brother, you are aware of his need, you have opportunity and the means to meet his need and he starves. Isn't that a blight on the Lord's Church if that happens? Where is our sense of the fact that we belong to the family of God, that we are brethren?

So it is true to say that coordinated action can demonstrate the gospel. But at the same time we must add this thought that there is a sense of corporate responsibility that demonstrates the gospel. We have a responsibility, a general, mutual responsibility in the family of God.

But we can even expand this further. The Bible does. Look at the book of Romans, chapter 15. Not only does the Bible present us with the thought that there is this general, mutual responsibility because we are family in Christ, but there is another step to understand and that is there is also such a thing as a historic responsibility. I mean, now we are looking not only at the fact that we are in the same family, but how this family came to be, how the church came to be, how the churchy came into existence. That also imparts a responsibility in terms of looking at redemption history. And what is amazing is Paul uses this very argument in connection with an offering. I mean, you talk about the most practical matter and he is thinking gospel. That is what I am trying to get across tonight. Even in the most practical areas we are to think gospel.

Look at Romans 15. Look at verse 25.

At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints.
For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution

¹⁴ 2 Corinthians 8:15.

for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. They were pleased to do it, and indeed...¹⁵

This is amazing. What does he say? “They owe it to them. They owe it to them.”¹⁶

What do you mean, Paul, they owe it to them? Well look on.

“For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings.”¹⁷

What is he saying? Gentiles?

Do you ever stop and realize that if not for God’s choice of the Jewish people, if not for the Messiah coming from this line and all that God has done in redemption in history, you wouldn’t have been grafted in. Now this is one of the arguments that he makes in the midst of the book of Romans, isn’t it? You have been grafted in. Don’t become proud and your heart be lifted up and look at unbelieving Jews today and say, “Oh, well, you know, they forsook the Lord and they forfeited blessing and look at us. We are so soft hearted and so wise and such a believing people. That is why we are saved.”

No, listen. Whoever has been saved, Old Testament, New Testament, Jewish or Gentile. Do you know what it is? It is the grace of God. And he is saying, “You have got to realize something. Salvation is of the Jews. All of these riches, all of this treasure that we now know, there is... you can trace it back and there is a Jewish root to it all so that now you have an opportunity, Gentile, who has been grafted into this gracious salvation, you have an opportunity to be a blessing to a Jewish brother.”

You are sharing in their blessings. That means you owe them something. You have been blessed spiritually because of what God chose to do with them. Now you have an opportunity to bless them materially. But whether, you know, you would naturally agree with that argument or not doesn’t matter. That is the argument that Scripture makes. That is the Word of God. And if we can’t get that into our heads and into our hearts then the problem is with us. We have got to be able to stop and realize, you know, we didn’t... salvation didn’t just show up with us. We have a real tendency to think that way sometimes, don’t we, that all of history began with our life or with our family or with our church or with our generation. No, sir. God has been doing his saving work for a long, long time and we have met with truth and met with Christ and we are owing to whatever God did before us for what we are experiencing right now. There is a debt that has been imparted. And even early on in the Church’s history the Gentiles were to recognize this.

So he makes a case for mutual responsibility based upon the family of God. He makes a case for mutual responsibility based upon redemption history.

¹⁵ Romans 15:25-27.

¹⁶ Romans 15:27.

¹⁷ Ibid.

But there is another aspect to this, a sense of mutual responsibility that is... has a different motivation. Go to the book of Philemon, if you would, please. Philemon chapter one or look at verse 19.

What does Paul say? He says, “I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it.”¹⁸

Right? If he owes you anything, if this slave that is coming home owes you anything, he has been converted. He is now a brother. And if he owes you anything, you put that to my account. I will pay you for it.

But do you notice what he adds there?

“...to say nothing of your...” What? “...owing me even your own self.”¹⁹

That is a humbling thing, isn't it? You want to talk about what he owes you, Paul says, well, what do you owe me, obviously meaning that this man had come to faith in Christ due to Paul's ministry. You owe me your life.

You see, folks, when we recognize not only opportunity in ministry, but when we recognize responsibility, the gospel gets put on display. That is gospel thinking. That is understanding things from God's point of view.

By the way, don't you love it? I love this when the Bible blows up the way we think about things. I mean, just takes what so many people think about something and just obliterates it, because there is—and you know this. You have seen this—there is this super sanctimonious, pseudo spiritual mindset that says, “I don't owe anyone anything but God.”

What do I owe you? I mean, couldn't Philemon have said to Paul? Some would have if they had the attitude that they have. Some would have said to Paul, “I don't owe you anything. The Lord saved me. What do I owe you?”

What kept the Corinthian Church, the Church at Rome—let's use the Church at Rome because that is where he mentions it—what keeps the Church at Rome from saying, “We don't owe the Jews anything. The Lord saved us”?

I mean, doesn't that sound super spiritual to say, “I don't owe anyone anything but God.”

But do you know what? That is not the biblical language, is it? That is not how Paul thought. And when we think that way, what we are underestimating is that though we ultimately owe all things, all boasting is in the Lord Jesus Christ. All thanks ultimately goes to God. We should never underestimated the fact nor miss the fact that sovereign God has chosen to work through human means.

¹⁸ Philemon 19.

¹⁹ Ibid.

And do you know what? We owe people, too. There is a proper sense. This is what humility teaches. There is a proper sense of thanks that ought to be present in our hearts not only of the one who does the work, but for the means that he uses. And you are not thinking spiritually when you ignore that as Paul demonstrates here.

Look back at our text, if you would, 1 Corinthians chapter 16. This is practical stuff. He is telling them how to take up an offering. But what stands behind it? Well, what stands behind it is there is this corporate action going on amongst the churches. That demonstrates the gospel. What fuels that is a corporate sense of responsibility as he shares in 2 Corinthians and in the book of Romans. That puts the gospel on display when we understand that and we think that way.

There is a third thing that we dare not miss and that is—and perhaps this is the strongest principle of all here. The third thought is this. Spiritual work must be responsibly organized. You want to think gospel? See, here is what we do sometimes. Again, blowing up our ideas.

Sometimes we think gospel means we are not organized, that if we rely on the Lord that sort of throws organization out the window. I mean, if the Lord is doing it, it is just going to happen, right? Who needs planning? Who needs organization? Who needs structure? Who needs to think this through? Who needs to have ideas? I mean, if the Lord is doing it, just let go and let God.

Is that how Paul thought?

How many here tonight would agree Paul was one organized fellow? He was organized. In fact, just notice with me in these four verses every expression of organization.

First of all, we can see this. He was organized as to how it was going to be collected. Just in general terms he had a plan, because notice what he says in verse one.

“Now concerning the collection for the saints:[and then he says this] as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do.”²⁰

Oh, guess what? This was not just a church specific plan, was it? This was a plan that he was applying in all the churches. Do you know what? You want to know how I want you to do it? Well, I am going to tell you what I told them. I am going to tell you what I told the churches in Galatia.

In other words, there was this way of doing it that was being practiced wherever Paul was initiating this offering. So in general terms we could say he was organized as to how it was to be done. The plan had been thought out. This is something he was not just saying to one group of people, spur of the moment. “Well, here is what I think you ought to do.” This was the same thing he had said to other churches.

²⁰ 1 Corinthians 16:1.

Second, he was organized as to when it was to occur. He says, verse two, “On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up.”²¹

All right, beloved, what is the first day of the week speaking in Jewish terms? What is the first day of the week? Sunday, the day after the sabbath day. So he is saying now, “Each week on Sunday, on the Lord’s day, each one of you is to put something aside and store it up. So there is a particular time when this is to be occurring, the first day of every Sunday, which leads to the third way this was organized, organized as to where, where this offering was going to be gathered.

Why do you think he says, “The first day of every week?”

You know, some have said, “Well, I think they were gathering... they were to be gathering this at home.”

Well, there is a couple of problems with that. First of all, if you are going to gather it at home you can gather it every day. What happens on the first day of the week from the standpoint of the church? What happens? The church gathers together. This is when the church gathers together. This is the time for corporate worship. This offering was to be collected weekly as the saints gathered together. This was an offering gathered at the church.

There is another way we know that. Notice what he adds, the whole reason why he is saying it ought to be done that way. He says at the end of verse two, “... as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come.”²²

When I arrive, it is going to already have been gathered. Now if this was just everybody gathering at home then guess what would have had to have happened as soon as Paul arrived? They would have had to have collected it all and brought it all together. But that is not what he is talking about. No, the collecting place is the church as it gathers and the collecting time is the first day of every week, it is as they worship together.

Something else is organized here. It is organized as to who is to be participating. He says in verse two, “Each of you.”

“On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside...”²³

That is, each believer in the Church at Corinth had a responsibility. That is very instructive, because, you see, while this was a free will offering as Paul will make plain in 2 Corinthians, once the church decided to act in this way, they acted together as a congregation. Once the decision was made, the Church at Corinth is participating. Well, then, each believer had a responsibility in that giving endeavor.

²¹ 1 Corinthians 16:2.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

We could say it this way. The giving of the Church is every believer's responsibility. Who is responsible to give towards the ministry at Founder's Baptist Church? The answer is: Every single member who has the ability to do so, each of us.

Notice another way it was organized, organized as to how, organized as to when, organized as to where, organized as to who. There is something else. Organized as to how much. Well, how much am I to give? The answer is there is no specific amount that is dictated. But there is some guidance there, verse two.

“On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper.”²⁴

As he may prosper. Literally the thought is, “As God has granted each one success during the week.” That is, as God has blessed, as you have been prospered, however you may prosper. If you... in other words, the giving is to be proportional. If God has prospered you greatly than give in accordance with that. If this week has been a lean week, but there is some prosperity, then give in accordance with that. It is not the size of the gift. But it is the size of the sacrifice. So he gives guidance there.

It is also organized as to its purpose. I mean, he is able to tell them why he wants it done this way.

“...so that there will be no collecting when I come.”²⁵

This is so important. He is saying, “I don't want this to be done hastily. I don't want this to be done haphazardly. I don't want this to be some kind of off the cuff response. I want there to be planned, you know, a precise patterned way that we do this.”

There is another way that it was organized. It was organized as transport. How was it going to get to Jerusalem? He has already figured that out.

Verse three.

“And when I arrive, I will send those whom you accredit by letter to carry your gift to Jerusalem.”²⁶

You are going to participate in this. You are going to choose ambassadors for your congregation. And Paul says, “I am going to supply letters for them.” That is, he is going to give his recommendation as they go to Jerusalem. That is, if he doesn't go, because he also has thought this through, as well. He also holds out the possibility that he may go.

Verse four.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ 1 Corinthians 16:2.

“If it seems advisable that I should go also, they will accompany me.”²⁷

And the letters, of course, wouldn't be needed at that point.

I mean, everything about this says this was not off the cuff. This was planned. There is a powerful principle there for us, isn't there. We listen. We don't honor God through disorganization. We are not useful to God through disorganization. We do not honor God through a haphazard approach to things. We do not honor God through laziness, which is often times what is really behind our lack of organization.

It is we just don't want to work that hard at it. We don't want to give that much thought to it. God is not honored when we just let things turn out the way they would turn out on their own. There is a lesson here. The lesson is God worked through Paul's organization and he will work through ours as we organize in a way that is dependent upon him and submitted to him.

By the way, friend, you organization... at the same time let me add this word of caution. Your organization is not God. We can be very organized and ineffectual. So as an organization that is dependent upon the Lord looks to the Lord, submitted to the Lord even as it is organizing. God, I want to organize according to principles that I find in your Word and be true to your Word. And then we realize that if God doesn't add his blessing, you know, the laborers can build all they want, but without the Lord building the house, the laborers labor in what? Vain.

So coordinated action can demonstrate the gospel, a right understanding of corporate responsibility demonstrates the gospel. Spiritual work is to be responsibly... it must be responsibly organized.

One final thought and I think a powerful thought, at least to my mind. Running through all of this is the truth of the unified corporate nature of the local church. These people were instructed to act together, right? I mean, we are individual disciples of Jesus Christ. That will never change. Thank God that he has saved us, that we individually are his children. But, listen. We don't live individualistic lives. Even the way that we worship in song, you read some of the Puritans and I think they were on to something with the idea. You know, we sing together. There is a corporate voice as we give voice to our worship.

Even think about the disciples prayer and how it begins.

“Our Father who art in heaven...”

I mean as the Lord teaches us to pray at the very beginning, there is the acknowledgement. You are not just my Father, you are our Father. I belong to your family. We are desperately missing that in our day. Everyone has their own little individual thing with God, their own little individualistic view of what it means to walk

²⁷ 1 Corinthians 16:4.

with God. And we must learn something. Listen. Membership in a local church is taking up a responsible place in a covenanted community. Joining a church means something. Leaving a church means something. When you join a church you covenant with those people to serve the Lord together. It means you submit to the leadership of the church. It means that you not only submit to their watch care over your soul, but you also commit to watch for each other. There is mutual care. There is mutual accountability. There is mutual exhortation, mutual encouragement. This is what it means to belong to the family of God local. And, yes, we must recognize even as is demonstrated here. You are just one church in the midst of many churches and, yes, let's cooperate together for the sake of the gospel, but God plants you in a particular congregation and there your soul is watched for, so that when an offering is being taken, for example, let each one lay in store, each one on the first day of the week. Together we engage in this. We are not just these individualistic disciples. We serve the Lord together.

Is that your view of church membership? I trust that for most here it is in our church. I thank God for that. But I am telling you, beloved, that is not the mindset for our generation, not at all. But it is what you see here.

So a very practical issue, right? He is taking up an offering. But saturating this practical thing is a gospel perspective. And I want to exhort you before we pray tonight to take a gospel perspective with you into every area of your life and every decision you make. When you go to work, go there understanding you are not only an individual disciple of Jesus Christ, but a part of this congregation.

Do you ever stop and ask someone to pray for you? I mean, you are facing a significant issue, do you ask for prayer? Facing a significant decision, do you ask of counsel? Are you allowing?

You know, years and years ago—and I don't want to get too far off track—but years and years ago there was... as I was serving as a youth pastor, my pastor told me something that stuck with me and it has proven to be true. He said, "Richard, remember something. You will never...as you go to pastor a church one day, you will never pastor all of those people."

I thought, "What do you mean?"

And he said this. He said, "Because they won't all allow you to."

Now I am going to have to sort of adjust what he said, because wherever we are serving as an under shepherd, as elders, we have a responsibility for every one given into our care whether they want that or not. But I will tell you this. There are some people who make it easier to shepherd them than others because they allow themselves to be shepherded. What is your view of your service in the church, outside the church? How do you see your relationship to the body of Christ and to this local church? Let it match the Scriptures. And all of God's people would say amen.

Let's pray together.

Our Father in heaven, we thank you that when you saved us, we became not only your disciples, but, Lord, we were also at that very instant made a part of the body of Christ and we were made a part of your Church as it exists in its spiritual form. We also thank you, Lord, that our Savior is building his Church on this earth in the sense of local churches. And we thank you, Lord, that you have planted us in a local community of believers where there is mutual love and mutual responsibility and mutual care and mutual accountability. And I pray, Lord, that we would not take our view of our lives and of our church from the culture, but from your Word. Lord, help us to be sharp and precise and accurate in the way we view these things. And let our hearts be submissive to you by being submissive to Scripture as we learn, as we grow and as we serve you. Lord, we ask you to bless the fellowship here. Help us, Lord, to be faithful to you, to be faithful to each other and also to be faithful to our responsibility to share the gospel with lost souls all around us. We ask you for this in Jesus' name. Amen.