

## ***Paul's Heart for the Gospel*** **1 Corinthians 16:1-12**

What drives your days? You get up in the morning, have breakfast and head out into the big, wide world. What is it that determines what you do? What's the underlying motivation for how you spend your time and how you make decisions?

- Other people?
- Routine?
- Habit?
- Money?
- Your own expectations?

I suspect for most of us, we don't think about that much. A lot of what we do gets tied back to some decision we made sometime in the past and that drives much of what happens in our days now – a decision about career or a marriage or a particular job. It's the routine that keeps flowing from those choices back then. That's helpful. It means we don't have to think it all through again for two hours every morning.

Yet, sometimes it's helpful to revisit it – especially if we feel we're just going through the motions or if we feel the decision may have been less than helpful or if we seem to have lost our important priorities. In several ways, this passage tonight raises that sort of question for us. Quite casually, it shows us what drove Paul's days.

### **The Structure**

Originally I planned to deal with all of chapter 16 in the one talk. At first glance, it just looks like a whole bunch of sundry stuff strung together at the end of the letter. As one person put it: it's like when you get in your car to go

and suddenly remember all these last minute instructions.

- Don't forget to turn the oven on.
- Remember to ring the doctor.
- Make sure your brother has his bath.

But, as I looked at it more closely, I realised that would ignore the structure of this chapter – and the letter as a whole. Those last-minute instructions don't begin until verse 13. The first 12 verses actually deal with two other matters the Corinthians raised in their letter – namely:

- the collection; and
- asking Apollos to visit.

Verse 1 and verse 12 have the same introductory phrase we've seen four times before.

- The first one was in 7:1 – *now for the matters you wrote about* – and Paul then wrote about marriage.
- The next topic was singleness (7:25)
- Then came food sacrificed to idols (8:1)
- Then came spirituality and spiritual gifts (12:1)

So tonight, we'll just look at these two topics they raised.

### **The Collection**

First, the collection. Verse 1:

*Now about the collection for God's people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do. On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made. Then, when I arrive, I will give letters of introduction to the men you approve and send them with your gift to Jerusalem. If it seems advisable for me to go also, they will accompany me.*

There aren't many details here – but this isn't the only time Paul mentions this collection. Many more details

are found in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 and Luke also refers to it in Acts 24. This collection was important to Paul. Several factors were behind it.

- First, Jerusalem had experienced famine – perhaps a series of famines – and so was needy. Christians there were struggling to survive. And because they were ostracised by faithful Jews, they didn't get any support from that quarter.
- Secondly, all the great spiritual blessings Gentile churches now enjoyed came out of Jerusalem. The great gospel news radiated out from God's city – as was promised through the prophets. Paul considered it appropriate that the Gentiles send back physical blessings in gratitude. Paul sees it as part fulfilment of the prophecies of the last days that the treasures of the nations would flow to Jerusalem.
- Thirdly, this was a way to show the world that the gospel transformed the lives of Gentiles as well as Jews. In Ephesians 2, Paul speaks of humanity's past great divide into Jew and Gentile. But that divide is overcome by Jesus' death. Jew and Gentile are now brought equally into God's family on the same basis – forgiveness through the death of Jesus. This collection was a practical way to show the truth of that reality.
- Fourthly, it was good for the Corinthians. God's grace is designed to make us gracious people. As God has shown us incredible grace in the gospel, so He wants to transform us into people who are likewise gracious to others. We're blessed by God to be a blessing to others. That happens at the spiritual level – as God has forgiven us, so we're to forgive others. It also happens at the physical level – as God provides for our needs, so we're to use His

resources to provide for the needs of others. We're not to be a selfish blockage that simply hoards up all God's blessings for ourselves. That hinders God's work within the world.

That's some of the background to this collection – but it's not the focus here. Here Paul just gives basic, practical instructions on how to get the money ready for when the time comes. He doesn't want it to be a half-baked thing that's quickly put together when he next turns up.

- That would be pressured.
- That could be embarrassing if the result was pitiful.
- That could easily lead to resentment.
- That wouldn't result in gracious, cheerful giving.

He wants them to get ready ahead of time.

So, he gives them some good, practical advice. Plan for it. Don't just leave it to some haphazard feeling when the time comes. The plan he suggests is:

- Do it on a regular basis – the first day of each week.
- Do it on a personal basis – check out what you've earned each week and put aside what you think's appropriate from that.
- Do it on a committed basis – save it for the purpose of this collection; don't be tempted to dip into it if you're struggling one week.

There are a couple of things worth highlighting.

- Their income was less regular than ours – and many weren't paid on a weekly basis. Paul thinks it good for them to review their situation each week. Any less often, and human nature being what it is, they'd be likely to forget.
- Most likely their income varied from week to week.

Thus the need for regular considered review at a personal level. Some weeks they'd have more available to give; other weeks less.

- No percentages are mentioned. No fixed sums are mentioned. Paul doesn't impose some legalistic thing on them. Each individual is to decide how they're to be generous. As God's blessed them, so they're to bless others.
- Most likely, this is something done at home. It's not brought to the church meeting until it's time to send it off to Jerusalem. They didn't have church buildings to store it in. The banking system wasn't quite like today's. They were each to keep this at home until the appropriate time came. Then, when it's time to send the money off to Jerusalem, they'd all be ready.

So this collection's not quite like what we moderns think of when we talk about church offerings. It's not for the regular upkeep of the church budget – it's for a special one-off purpose.

Still, the practical principles remain much the same.

- We should plan our stewardship. What we have is God's – entrusted to us for His purposes. So, we should think through how best to use His resources for His purposes – and act accordingly.
- We should take the opportunity to review regularly. Most of us receive a more regular income and so we find it helpful to set up direct debiting systems. But that doesn't mean we should simply forget it. We should review our situation regularly. Are my spending habits simply determined by the pagan culture? Should I go out for coffee? Can I free up more money for gospel work and helping others?

- We should think and act on the basis of grace. Consider how God's blessed us and think through how we can bless others.

The other thing Paul highlights about the collection is the arrangements for its transportation to Jerusalem. Paul's very concerned that the Corinthians can see everything's above board – that it's all done with integrity and transparency. He wants to ensure they know this money isn't being syphoned off into his own pocket – or in any other direction. They're to appoint representatives – people they trust – to take the money to Jerusalem. Paul himself may or may not go with them. This has other benefits as well.

- These guys are living testimony to gospel's power among the Gentiles. They're concrete examples of the spiritual blessings flowing out from Jerusalem.
- They also bear personal testimony of the nature of the collection to people in Jerusalem – of the circumstances under which the money was raised.
- And then, when they return, they'll have stories to tell in Corinth about the church in Jerusalem and how the collection was received.

It'll all result in great mutual encouragement and joy.

It's usual for churches today also to show great concern to demonstrate that everything to do with money is done with integrity and transparency. It remains important. Elsewhere Paul writes:

*the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.*

We take this seriously. We know the temptations that surround money. We know none of us is exempt from those temptations – even those we consider strong. And so we try to limit temptation in regard to church moneys.

- We have more than one person count it.
- We check that what's counted is banked.
- We have safeguards over access to it – like requiring two signatures on cheques.

All these sorts of things rightly stem from Paul's example in how he handled this collection.

Having spoken about the collection, Paul has two related digressions. The collection raised the matter of his travel plans – and especially when he'd next be in Corinth to get this collection on its way to Jerusalem. In verses 5 to 9, he expands on that.

- He's currently in Ephesus. He plans to stay there till Pentecost. Ministry's going well in Ephesus – though it's not without its opposition.
- He then plans to revisit the churches he planted in Macedonia – Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea. He wants to see how they're going – strengthen them, encourage them.
- Then he plans to get to Corinth – and he hopes to spend the winter there.
- Then he plans to go ... He's not sure. He may go to Jerusalem with the collection. He may go somewhere else – perhaps continue evangelising his way towards Rome.

In these plans, we see something of Paul's ministry heart. First, as always, his plans are subject to God's will. You see that at the end of verse 7. He evaluates the circumstances. He weighs up his options. He decides what he thinks is best for the gospel. But ultimately, he's not in control. It's James 4. He applies his own godly wisdom to the situation, but God calls the final shots.

Secondly, Paul's heart is for the gospel mission. Verse 9: *because a great door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many who oppose me.*

That's what delays him getting back to Corinth. He's got this great opportunity to preach the gospel in this crucial city. In Acts 19, Luke tells us the gospel radiated back into the whole province of Asia during the two years Paul spent in Ephesus. Effective missionary work was being done. Not that it was without opposition.

- The Jewish establishment kicked him out of the synagogue after three months.
- Evil spirits tried to oppose him.
- The local silversmith guild got upset with him because of the drop-off in idol production – though that may not have happened before he wrote this letter.

But the opposition doesn't drive him away from evangelism – nor does it stop the spread of God's word.

Thirdly, Paul's heart is also for the churches – for that's the outcome of gospel mission. He wants to get back to the churches he's planted. He doesn't know how long he'll need to spend with each church in Macedonia – and that's why he's not sure when he'll get to Corinth. These visits aren't perfunctory – some distasteful duty he wants to get over as quickly as possible. These are his spiritual children. He wants to strengthen and encourage them. He wants to deal with any problems that may have arisen. He wants to ensure they're growing to maturity. And he knows that will take time.

And it'll be the same when he gets to Corinth as well. Now, as we've gone through this letter, we've seen that there are significant problems in this church – and some

of those problems have caused tensions between the church and Paul. Some in Corinth want to ditch Paul and follow a more exciting leader. So you could understand if Paul wanted to put this church in the too-hard basket – pay them a quick visit to keep up appearances, but move pretty quickly to less troublesome areas. That's not Paul. He wants to spend time with them. He wants to see them back on the right track and solidly growing.

And he hopes they also will help him on his journey. It's a technical term that refers to providing someone with food, money and travelling companions to get them safely to where they're headed. In other words, though Paul had earlier refused to accept monetary payment at Corinth – so he could preach the gospel free of charge – he's about to let them support him in his future ministry.

Paul himself embodies the message he preaches – which is exactly what it should always be for Christians. In 11:1, he wrote:

*Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.*

In these verses we see that lived out. The gospel totally transformed his life. It set his direction. It set his priorities. It determined how he thought about others. As one preacher put it: Christianity reached right down to his finger-tips and the ends of his toes – no secret rooms held back for himself. It just comes across so naturally as he opens up in this incidental way about his travel plans. But this is the reality of his life. It challenges us to ask whether we experience this as the reality of our lives.

The second related digression has to do with Timothy – and the job Paul's given him. Clearly, Paul's concerned Timothy's reception in Corinth may be less than ideal.

- Paul's aware of the Corinthian preference for strong, powerful, impressive leaders and worries Timothy may face rejection because he doesn't measure up to their worldly standards.
- Paul's aware of the tension some have towards himself and worries they may take that out on Timothy.

He knows Timothy's young and perhaps a bit frail and a little on the timid side. Is he throwing Timothy into the proverbial lions' den?

And so Paul does what he can to prepare the way. Timothy's doing God's work. They should receive him as such. They shouldn't refuse him. They shouldn't give him a hard time. They shouldn't try to intimidate him or oppose him or run him out of town. Certainly, evaluate his teaching according to the Scriptures – as they should do with everyone. But they're to receive Timothy as Paul's trusted co-worker – as one who's devoted himself to serving Jesus in ministry.

## **Apollos**

And so we come to their next question. Verse 12:

*Now about our brother Apollos: I strongly urged him to go to you with the brothers. He was quite unwilling to go now, but he will go when he has the opportunity.*

It seems the Corinthians asked Paul to ask Apollos to come to them. We don't know why.

- Maybe it's just convenience – they're already writing to Paul and so ask him to pass on the message. One would think it simple enough to write a separate brief letter to Apollos.
- Maybe there's tension between them and Apollos – and they want Paul to act as a go-between.

- Maybe they wanted Apollos as their pastor and thought they should check with Paul.

We don't know – and none of the guesses make a great deal of sense.

But what is significant is that Paul did ask. Again, this shows Paul's gospel heart. This is God's church, not his. From a purely human and self-centred point of view, you could come up with several reasons why Paul should not ask.

- Apollos was a gifted speaker – more gifted than Paul. Paul would get moved even further down the list of favourite preachers in Corinth.
- Apollos had his own personal following in Corinth – his name was mentioned in association with one of the groups back in chapter 1. This would give Apollos an opportunity to build up this group and have them take over the church.

But that's not how Paul thinks. He preaches Jesus as Lord – and Apollos and Cephas and Paul as your slaves for Jesus' sake. And he means it. One plants, another waters, but it's God who gives the growth. He means that too. Sure, Paul did the planting – but he did it for Jesus. It's God's church – not Paul's. If God thinks Apollos is good for this church, Paul won't stand in the way.

There's no suggestion here of tension between Paul and Apollos. That's all on the Corinthian side – they're the ones who formed these various groups and attached these leaders' names to them. Paul and Apollos had nothing to do with that. They simply ministered faithfully as the opportunity presented itself.

As it turns out, Apollos isn't going to Corinth at the

present time. In the original, it's hard to work out if it's God's will that's meant or Apollos'. And we aren't given any further reason. Is he off somewhere taking advantage of some other great door of effective work? That's quite likely. His name's not mentioned in the greetings – so it's unlikely he's still in Ephesus. Whatever the reason, he's not coming at the present time – but he hopes to get there some time in the future.

Our culture often encourages rivalry. We compete for position and recognition. We rejoice in our successes. We also rejoice in the downfall of our perceived rivals. We're tempted to bring that into the church.

- Pastors competing for bigger congregations.
- Leaders competing for control.
- Ordinary members competing to be considered more spiritual or more godly.

Paul doesn't play the comparison game. His security is in the great blessings he receives in the gospel: forgiveness, citizenship in God's kingdom, God's indwelling Spirit. They don't come from competition. They aren't earned by personal merit. And so he's free in his ministry to simply pursue whatever is best for Jesus.

We started tonight by asking: What drives your days? What's the underlying motivation for how you spend your time and how you make decisions? For Paul, it's pretty clear it's the gospel. This great news of who Jesus is and what Jesus did for him transformed his life completely. That became the driving force behind his lifestyle – from organising this collection to making his travel plans to how he related to fellow-Christians. It all comes out so incidentally. Do our own lives look like that?