

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: The Church - a Work in Progress

(Studies in 1 Corinthians)

Faithful Stewards of Our Stewardship(s)

(1 Corinthians 16:1-24)

Study #22

Introduction: The uniquely powerful role of a steward...

In the first-century world, a “steward” filled a uniquely powerful role in the life of his wealthy employer. (or master)

The steward wasn’t, personally, the owner of anything, but he managed his employer’s everything. (Think of the ancient steward as a modern-day asset or property manager.)

In one of His parables (Luke 16:1-12), Jesus used the term “*steward* / “*manager*” to describe what His followers are to do.

Based on that parable, we understand that we are to take what belongs to Jesus - that would be everything we are and have - and use it to do whatever furthers Jesus’ interests.¹

Paul picked up on this theme when he described Christians as “*stewards of the mysteries of God.*” And what are we, as stewards, to do? We are to be “*trustworthy*” to carry out our stewardship to follow Jesus. (1 Corinthians 4:1-2)

We are to do what Jesus gives us to do in the spirit of a steward who is out to further the interests of Jesus, our Master.

In our final look into 1 Corinthians, I’m using the term “stewardship” to describe the glorious works into which Jesus calls us.

A series that started way back in May concludes today...except for one different sort of message from 1 Corinthians next Sunday.

Over these months, Paul has taken us on quite a ride. He gave us instructions about married life, divorce and remarriage, worship services, stumbling blocks, and the exercise of spiritual gifts.

He has warned us against suing members of our Christian family, told us to weed out immorality in the church, and explored what are the implications of the resurrection to our lives NOW.

The end of the end of 1 Corinthians...

Now we come to chapter 16, which is the end of the letter. The end of the end consists of final greetings and a benediction from Paul to his friends in Corinth.

[15] Now I urge you, brothers and sisters: you know the household of Stephanas, that they are the first fruits of Achaia, and that they have devoted themselves to ministry to the saints; [16] I urge that you also be subject to such as these and to everyone who helps in the work and labors. [17] I rejoice over the coming of Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus, because they have supplied what was lacking on your part. [18] For they have refreshed my spirit and yours. Therefore acknowledge such men.

[19] The churches of Asia greet you. Aquila and Prisca greet you heartily in the Lord, with the church that is in their house. [20] All the brothers and sisters greet you. Greet one another with a holy kiss.

[21] The greeting is in my own hand - that of Paul. [22] If anyone does not love the Lord, he is to be accursed. Maranatha! [23] The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you.

[24] My love be with you all in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Paul had an exceptionally rich relationship with this church. He knew them by name.

¹ See, too, Luke 20:19-26.

Yes, the church had problems (that is not remarkable...), so he “took them on” and dealt with them honestly and severely.

But in those passages where Paul was being the most severe, we still see that his heart bled for them. He wrote what he wrote because he loved them. And THAT is the end of the end of the letter.

We’ll spend, now, the bulk of our time together listening to what Paul had to say before he got to the ending benediction.

In the prelude to the end, he touches on three stewardships in a Christian’s life. The first stewardship he mentions is generosity.²

Stewardship in the Realm of Generosity (16:1-4)

Give Attention to Money Matters (16:1)

Paul had recently travelled through Galatia. As he went from church to church through that region, he told them about a pressing financial need and encouraged them to give toward that need.

He gave that same message to the Corinthian Christians.

[1] Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you are to do as well.

Paul was collecting money, but that money wasn’t for himself. It was for the relief of poor Christians living in Jerusalem who were suffering both from a terrible famine and from severe persecution.

A man named Agabus (he was a prophet in the early church) had predicted this famine and the suffering that would come with it. (Acts 11) The Jerusalem Christians were in extreme poverty.³

We aren’t surprised that Paul told the Corinthians about this need. But telling them tells us about a stewardship we and all Christians have from God.

It involves our money.

Following Jesus extends to prayer and to Bible study and to every arena of life - including our financial life. So, Paul urged the Corinthians to give.

He was planning a trip to Corinth in the near future. He wanted them to know that when he arrived, he would collect money from them for this pressing need.

He gave instructions for how they were to handle this offering. First, it was for a specific purpose.

The Ministry of Liberality (16:1-2)

Giving is to be purposeful and intentional (v. 1)

[1] Now concerning the collection for the saints...

Again, he was inviting them to give toward what we can call, The Jerusalem Famine Relief Fund.

Notice that this offering wasn’t for some unknown cause. It wasn’t vague or nebulous. It was specific.

As they set aside money, the Corinthians were to have in mind suffering Christians in Jerusalem who would be helped by this money.

When you give, you are to have in your mind who and what it is you are giving to.

You are supporting a missionary’s daily needs. You are giving a Christian in another country the first copy of the Bible she’s ever had.

Your gift is putting food in a hungry child’s mouth, supporting the ministry to kids or to youth here, protecting a Christian who is in danger from Islamic terrorists in Uganda.

used this same formula when addressing factions and cliques in the church (1:11), marriage (7:1, 25), food sacrificed to idols (8:1, 4), and spiritual gifts. (12:1)

³ Note Galatians 2:10. There Paul affirms his priority to “**remember the poor.**”

² Since he starts off with “**concerning’ the collection for the saints...**” I assume that he is, here, again responding to a question that the Corinthians had asked. He

You know where your money is going. You have people in mind who will be touched in Jesus' Name. Specificity fuels generosity.

Second, we can't help but notice that giving was to be regular.

Giving is to be regular (v. 2a)

[2] On the first day of every week...so that no collections need to be made when I come.

Giving isn't to be haphazard or random. It is to be well thought out, prepared for, consistent, even budgeted.

Paul encouraged that the collection be made on the first day of the week because that was when the church gathered for worship.⁴ The Christians were all together on that day, so it just made sense that each one would give toward this particular need, then.

From the time that the Corinthians received this letter until the time that Paul showed up in Corinth, they were to give, every Sunday, to a fund that would meet the needs of fellow Christians who were in a world of hurt.

That way, when Paul arrived, there would be no last minute, high-pressure, arm-twisting, guilt-motivated fund-raising efforts.

If you are at the front end of your Jesus-following journey, or if you haven't yet considered that generosity is a major stewardship from God for your life in Jesus, Paul is giving tremendous wisdom here.

A first step is to begin setting aside money. Regularly.

Do it weekly, every other week, with every paycheck, once a month. You choose.

⁴ It is not a command that worship take place on the first day of the week or that the collection be made then. It is simply the case that the first day of the week (Sunday) has always been special to Christians because that was the day on which Jesus rose from the grave.

But do develop a habit of setting aside a dedicated amount of money that you will then give to meet needs in Jesus' Name.

Let regularity mark your giving. Third, we note the individual uniqueness related to Christian generosity.

Giving is to be uniquely individual⁵ (v. 2b)

[2]...each of you is to put aside and save as he may prosper.

The measure of a person's giving relates to his or to her means.

Each one is encouraged to give to this pressing need. But the amount of giving is up to the giver. The percentage anyone chooses to give will be unique to each one's situation.

Or, as Paul wrote in his second letter to the Corinthians, **[9:7] *Each one must do just as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.***

Those who have less resources will give a smaller amount and a lesser percentage. Those who have more resources will give a larger amount and a larger percentage.

But just as we observe that here Paul mentioned neither amount nor percentage, we also observe that neither amount nor percentage is ever prescribed for a Christian when it comes to giving.

That comment prompts me to say just a bit more about Christian giving, specifically as it differs from the Old Testament tithe.

Note on tithing:

The Old Testament tithe (meaning 10%) was the equivalent of a tax levied on the Jews to support the priesthood. The tithe was obligatory for every Jew.

⁵ Note the story of the widow's mite. (Mark 12:41-44) To discern the worth of the gift, God looks, not at the amount of the gift, but at the heart of the giver.

The “**whole tithe**” (which Malachi mentions) would have been something well over 10%. It would have been at least 13% and might have ranged as high as 22% of a Jew’s annual income.

Moses told the Jews to pay the tithe to support the religious / political system of his day.⁶

Parallel to that Paul told Christians to support the government under which they live by paying taxes. (See Romans 13:1-7)

Christian giving (or “**the ministry of liberality**” as Paul calls it in 2 Corinthians 8-9) is separate from obligatory payments to a governing authority.

In Old Testament times, when there were special projects that needed funding, or when there were people who needed to be supported, special offerings were made for these efforts.

In the same way, Christian giving is what a Christian freely gives to support needy people, meet needs in Jesus’ Name, and to support His work locally and globally.

But, again, the New Testament never puts an obligatory amount or a percentage to this giving. It is to be as each one decides in his own heart. (2 Corinthians 9:7)

So, giving is to be specific, regular, and from the heart. And our dealings with money are to be marked by integrity. Listen to how Paul safeguards the integrity of this collection he is promoting.

Financial Integrity (16:3-4)

[3] When I arrive, whomever you approve, I will send them with letters to take your gift to Jerusalem; [4] and if it is appropriate for me to go also, they will go with me.

I love this.

Paul didn’t tell them, “*When I get there, I’ll take it from Corinth to Jerusalem.*”

The church at Corinth **collected** the money; the church at Corinth would be responsible for **carrying** the money.

It will be more than one person. It will be “**them**” who go. More than one person always handles the money.

And not just any “**them**” but a group of people who pass muster with the Corinthians. They are “**approved.**”

And to give assurance to the Christians in Jerusalem that all is on the up and up, this “**them**” will carry a letter of commendation from Paul. (Complete with a total of the gift?)

And Paul may even go with them, but only “**if** [the church? outsiders? God? thinks that] **it is appropriate / fitting**” for him to go.

Paul understood, and we do, too, here at Northwest, that few things compromise a ministry’s credibility like the suspicion of a lack of financial integrity.

That is why, when Paul listed qualifications for Elders and Deacons in churches, he said that they must “**not be fond of sordid gain**” and that they must be “**free from the love of money.**” (1 Timothy 3; Titus 1)

Scripture speaks often about the importance of integrity. What happens when we are accused of collecting money without grace, or using it in ways that don’t honor God or respect integrity?

Well, God Himself and the ministry itself is discredited, sometimes in a whole community, and often for a very long time.⁷

Paul went to great lengths to reassure the Corinthians that finances were handled with the greatest attention to integrity.

⁷ Search the Internet and you’ll find countless examples of churches and Christian organizations that have been discredited by financial scandal. These scandals destroy the reputations of Christians, churches, and parachurch ministries.

⁶ Old Testament Israel was a theocratic (God-ruled) state.

So do we, here at our church, because God-honoring generosity marked by integrity is a stewardship we all have as Jesus' followers.⁸

Paul brings up another life stewardship, this one concerning service.

Stewardship in the Realm of Service (16:5-9)

Service with a Plan (16:5-7)

[5] But I will come to you after I go through Macedonia; for I am going through Macedonia, [6] and perhaps I will stay with you or even spend the winter, so that you may send me on my way wherever I go. [7] For I do not want to see you now just in passing; for I hope to remain with you for some time, if the Lord permits.

After reading that, Paul's friends in Corinth would still have questions about his travel plans.

Exactly when is he coming? How long will he stay? Is he bringing people with him? How many? Where will he go next?

None of that was clear. What was clear was that he was thoroughly committed to staying awhile in Corinth once he arrived. He *wanted* to spend time with them.

Here, we can't ignore or miss that Paul led an intensely relational life and was intensely relational toward the Corinthians.

We remember that when Paul went to Corinth and brought them Jesus' Gospel, he stayed with them for a considerable period of time. (eighteen months, so Acts 18:11)

As I understand it, this was longer than he stayed with most of the other churches he planted.

But he intentionally invested heavily in them when he was with them the first time. His plan was to stay long enough to do the same thing on this next trip.

But before making his way to Corinth, he's going to stay put in the city of Ephesus.

Choosing Obstacles if They Come With Opportunities (16:8-9)

[8] But I will remain in Ephesus until Pentecost; [9] for a wide door for effective service has opened to me...

I wish he had told us what that wide-open door for effective service was. It might have been...

...opportunities to speak with parts of the Ephesian community that had not yet heard the message.

...the chance he would have to pour himself into new believers.

...that he was excited about some new leadership training plan he had developed for more mature Christians in Corinth.

Clearly, Paul saw an extended stay in Ephesus as part of his stewardship from God.

As much as he loved the Corinthians and wanted to be with them, he couldn't go to them now. His stewardship wasn't finished in Ephesus. But you may have noticed that I didn't read all that he wrote about the Ephesus situation.

[9]...a wide door for effective service has opened to me, and there are many adversaries.

Opponents were opposing him. And these may have been Jewish opponents who opposed him like the Pharisees opposed Jesus.

Or they might have been Romans who worshiped Caesars and saw worshipping Jesus as sacrilege.

⁸ If you want more biblical guidance about giving generally, spend much time in 2 Corinthians, chapters 8 and 9. There, Paul gives the most exhaustive treatment of generosity we find in the New Testament.

Or maybe other Gentiles opposed him because his ministry threatened their worldview and their livelihood.⁹

Maybe all three and maybe more than this.

But we gain insight into Paul's thinking when we notice that he didn't write, "*There are open doors, but...*" as in "*...but I don't know about staying here because there are adversaries.*"

No. He wrote "***and...***" as in "*and If Jesus open doors for me to serve Him, I'll take the adversaries.*"

How utterly inspiring.

You and I know that in many places in our world today, the adversaries our brothers and sisters face in fulfilling their stewardship for Jesus are very similar to what Paul faced in Ephesus.

For the most part, the adversaries and adversities we face are different. But they do come. And they come in many shapes and sizes, such as...

...schedules that are hard to manage.

...health challenges.

...home and work obligations.

...actual opposition from a culture, or from friends, family, or co-workers who aren't friendly to our faith.

That's OK. Let the adversaries and opposition and adversity come. Stewards know that "*adversary*" doesn't mean "*door closed.*"

Paul expected and assumed adversaries. He knew that they were a part of what you get when you walked through an open door to serve Jesus.

He expected opposition because Jesus experienced it, and Jesus promised it.¹⁰ But adversaries of whatever sort aren't show-stoppers for Jesus' stewards.

Paul models faithful stewardship to serve Jesus. We aspire to follow in his steps.

So...we will pray for friends and family members to believe, we will serve Jesus where he allows, we will walk through doors God opens for us - AND there will be adversaries.

Adversaries don't nullify a stewardship.

There is one final life stewardship Paul highlights here. We see it by noticing what Paul has to say about two choice brothers and their travel plans.

Paul first mentions Timothy.

Stewardship in the Realm of Personal Agency (16:10-12)

Timothy's Story (16:10-11)

[10] Now if Timothy comes, see that he has no reason to be afraid while among you,¹¹ for he is doing the Lord's work, as I also am. [11] So do not look down on him, anyone. But send him on his way in peace, so that he may come to me; for I expect him with the brothers.

From this we see that Paul held Timothy in high esteem, and he loved him. He encouraged the Corinthians to treat Timothy well, to esteem him highly and to respect him.

They were to provide for Timothy's protection. Paul urged the Corinthians to send Timothy on to Ephesus if he did come to Corinth.

⁹ In Acts 19, we learn that much of the opposition Paul faced in Ephesus was from members of the idol makers guild, whose business was suffering because so many people were turning from idols to Jesus.

¹⁰ See John 15:18, 20-21; 16:1-3, 33.

¹¹ Because of a couple of comments Paul makes about Timothy in his two letters to him (1 Timothy 3:12; 2 Timothy 1:6), Timothy has a reputation for tending to be fearful. (I have heard him referred to as "*timid Timothy*").

But what is striking is that even though Paul was Timothy's spiritual father, Paul didn't know what Timothy was going to do.

He didn't know if Timothy was going to go to Corinth or if he was going to be coming to visit Paul in Ephesus with *"the brothers."*

Paul had evidently not told Timothy what to do.

Timothy had personal agency. He was free to make his own choices about where to go and when to go there.

If we have had the thought that the first-century church power structure consisted of Paul telling people where to go and giving orders, we've got another think coming.

Christians were certainly going all over the place, serving Jesus.

But, while there was some direction given at times by Paul or Peter or James, they weren't the ones calling the shots.

Each Christian was owning their own personal agency, deciding what he or she would do to fulfill their stewardship before God.

And then Paul went on to mention another choice brother. And from what he says here, we get an even more intriguing inside look at New Testament relational dynamics and power structures.

Apollos' Story (16:12)

[12] But concerning our brother Apollos, I strongly encouraged him to come to you with the brothers; and it was not at all his desire to come now, but he will come when he has the opportunity.

Paul *"encouraged"* Apollos to visit Corinth. No. He *"strongly encouraged"* Apollos to visit Corinth.

What would you have done if Paul had said to you, STRONGLY, *"I'd really like to see you go to Corinth soon. In fact, the sooner the better."*

I probably would have gone to Corinth. But not Apollos.

Apollos wasn't quite ready to go. There was unfinished business he had to attend to.

He will go to Corinth as soon as he has opportunity, as soon as it is convenient for him, as soon as he has fulfilled his stewardship before God, where he was.

It turns out that choice brothers and sisters make their own choices. Apostolic arm-twisting was insufficient to get Apollos to go to Corinth - and Paul was OK with that.

Even the great Apostle Paul didn't order people around. That is not the nature of Christian leadership. The authority of a Christian leader is sourced in servanthood, not authoritarian-ism.

Christian leaders in the first century didn't and those in the twenty first century don't order people around. Pastors don't. Elders don't.

Christian leaders lead with the authority of a servant and on the example of Jesus, the Master Servant.

This leaves each Christian free to choose what they will do as they wrestle with what is their stewardship from Jesus. Every Christian is responsible for his or her own stewardship to God.

No doubt Timothy and Apollos paid attention to what Paul had to say. They would have given weight to his advice and especially to his *"strong encouragement."*

But at the end of the day, for Timothy and Apollos and you and me - we are all to "own" our personal agency to carry out what we believe is our own stewardship before God.

So, if what someone is urging you to do gets in the way of what you believe God wants you to do, you graciously and firmly tell them, *"No"* so that you can say *"Yes"* to what you believe is God's stewardship for you.

Paul concludes the content of this long letter with one, multi-faceted summary exhortation.

Summary Exhortation: Life as a Challenge to be Faced (16:13-14)

[13] Be on the alert, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong. [14] All that you do must be done in love.

As I started looking at these five strong exhortations, I had to do what every interpreter does with them.

I had to ask, *“Why, here at the end, does Paul single out men, and not add a corresponding ‘act like women’ to give to the other half of the church.”*

I wondered if it was because men were Paul’s primary target audience. But I hadn’t had that thought in any of the previous fifteen and a half chapters.

I wondered if maybe if men needed these words more than other people do - and rejected that thought.

I wasn’t satisfied that an exclusive focus on men best fit this context, so I looked a bit more deeply at the word that my version translates, ***“act like men.”***

It is the Greek word *“andrizomai.”*

An exact translation of that word would be something like, *“be manly.”* But I found that in many places in Greek literature where the word is used, it carries the sense of *“be courageous.”*

In fact, quite a few versions of the English Bible give it exactly that translation.

So, I take it that Paul is issuing this final exhortation to all the readers of this letter, both men and women.¹²

This is a wonderful exhortation to Christian maturity. Here, there is a call to toughness and gentleness combined in one shot.

Paul urges vigilance, faithfulness, courageous strength, and love. It is a completely compelling picture of what a godly man or a godly woman is to be all about.

I can imagine Paul speaking directly to me as he writes these words. You can imagine these words are directly aimed at you.

- Don’t ever let your guard down. Be like a sentry on the wall, always ready for an attack.
- Never retreat. Stand in the truth that you know about Jesus, about the presence of the Spirit, about the beautiful body of Jesus.
- Be courageous when facing adversity of any kind. You are secure in God’s love. Nothing you face will ever separate you from Him.
- Don’t believe the lie of the enemy of your soul that you are weak. In Jesus, you have all the resources of strength you need to carry out His stewardship for you.
- And (wait for it...) LOVE. There it is. The highwater mark of discipleship and the goal of life in Jesus, greater than faith or hope (1 Corinthians 13:13), let everything that you do be marked by love.

¹² It is similar to the situation we have where Paul uses the word ***“brothers.”*** Sometimes, it is clear from the context that Paul has men in mind, so we translate with the exclusive, ***“brothers”*** (as in 1 Corinthians 16:11). At other times, he has a broader audience in mind (that is, the whole church) but is using the term

“brothers” as a collective indicating both men and women, so my version translates ***“brothers and sisters.”*** (as in 1 Corinthians 1:10, 1:26; 2:1; 3:1; 4:6; 6:5; 7:24; 8:12; 10:1; 11:33; 12:1; 14:6).