

## Chapter 18: Our Lord, Come!

*1 Corinthians 16:1–24*

As Paul closes this great letter to the Corinthian church, he deals with a number of ministry management issues. At first glance, this chapter seems to include everything left on Paul's to-do list for what he needed to communicate to the Corinthians; however, we should not miss the wider structure of the chapter. After spending so much time working through so many issues plaguing the Corinthian church, Paul now directs his attention to the ongoing, perpetual themes of life in the church: the ministry of mercy, the ministry of the word, and the unity of the church in our common hope of the Lord Jesus Christ. In this final chapter of 1 Corinthians, Paul bears witness to the idea that *Christ directs the ongoing ministry of the church until he comes again*.

### **Our Collection for Mercy (1 Cor. 16:1–4)**

In v. 1, Paul transitions into a new subject with the phrase “now concerning.” This is the fifth time he has used this transitional phrase so far, and he will use it one more time a bit later in this chapter (1 Cor. 7:1, 25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1, 12). Most likely, Paul uses this phrase to refer to a subject that the Corinthians brought up in one of their previous letters to Paul, in contrast to some of the issues that Paul himself addresses from his own concerns about the church at Corinth. Here, Paul addresses logistics surrounding the collection for the saints.

Since Paul is referring back to prior communication and planning about this collection, he omits a number of details about it. We know that Paul has organized this collection among “the churches of Galatia” (v. 1), and we know that the collection will go to Jerusalem (v. 3). Nevertheless, in contrast to other places where Paul seeks a collection, Paul here “says nothing of the recipients’ poverty (cf. 2 Cor. 9:12), their persecution (1 Thess. 2:14), or the Corinthians’ indebtedness to the mother church (Rom. 15:27),” as David Garland points out.<sup>1</sup> While these passages likely give some indication of the reasons for this particular collection, Paul gives no such reasons here.<sup>2</sup> We do see, however, that this was not an ongoing poor tax, like what the Jews were commanded to give (Deut. 14:28–29). Instead, this was a once-for-all effort, and it was a freewill offering, as Paul declines to lay any specific obligation on the Corinthians.<sup>3</sup> Paul urged each Corinthian simply to give “as he may prosper” (v. 2). We should notice carefully, then, that *every* member was encouraged to give “*each* of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper” (v. 2).<sup>4</sup> This setting aside may have been in their homes; however, Paul’s goal (“so that there may be no collecting when I come”) may

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<sup>1</sup> Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 752.

<sup>2</sup> Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 896.

<sup>3</sup> Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 226–27.

<sup>4</sup> Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 363.

suggest that they are to do the collecting now, and to set aside the money in a church treasury.<sup>5</sup>

In this collection, Paul operates out of an abundant of practical wisdom. So, he refuses to take the gift by himself, alone. Rather, “those whom you accredit by letter” would carry the gift to Jerusalem (v. 3). There would be accountability and transparency in the transportation of the gift. Even so, Paul offers to accompany those carrying the gift “if it seems advisable” (v. 4). Although Paul does not explicitly tie this to the ministry of those ordained to the office of deacon, Paul’s instructions frame the importance and significance of the diaconate. There are some similarities between what Paul writes here and what Peter appointed deacons to do in overseeing the daily distribution of food to widows in Jerusalem so that he and the other apostles could devote their attention to the ministry of the word and prayer (Acts 6:1–7). In both cases, the apostles recognize that their respective ministries of mercy is vital to the wellbeing of the church. Even so, they recognize that wisdom suggests that they not administer their ministries of mercy directly. So, both apostles outline careful procedures for how the congregation should select those from their midst to administer the mercy ministry (Acts 6:3, 5–6; 1 Cor. 16:3). To this day, the office of deacon is a critical, noble, and perpetual in the church for meeting the needs of the poor in our midst, and in other congregations (1 Tim. 3:8–13).

We should also notice that Paul directs the Corinthians to set aside the money for this collection “on the first day of every week” (v. 2). This is one of the places in the New Testament that reflect the change in the day of Sabbath observance from the seventh day of the week to the first day of the week, the Lord’s Day (cf. John 20:19, 26; Acts 20:7; Rev. 1:10).<sup>6</sup> The original language of the Fourth Commandment subtly authorized this change of day by differentiating between the actual command, “Remember *the* Sabbath day, to keep it holy,” and the original circumstance for observing the command: “the seventh day is *a* Sabbath to the LORD your God” (Ex. 20:8, 10).<sup>7</sup> The commandment requires remembering and sanctifying the Sabbath day, whenever God may appoint such a Sabbath day. In the Old Testament, there were a number of ceremonial *sabbaths* (cf. Lev. 23), but all of these ceremonial Sabbaths pointed forward to, and were fulfilled and abolished by, Christ (cf. Rom. 14:5; Col. 2:16). The New Testament, then, reveals that we fulfill the moral commandment to remember and sanctify the Sabbath day on the first day of the week, in remembrance of the day that our Lord Jesus was raised from the dead.

## Our Call to the Word (1 Cor. 16:5–18)

In the next section of this concluding chapter of the letter, Paul outlines a number of logistical plans for ongoing ministry in the church. What stands out chiefly in this passage is the way that Paul balances his careful planning alongside his recognition of the Lord’s guidance in the work. First, Paul writes of his own intention to visit the Corinthians when he passes through Macedonia (v. 5–7). He hopes to spend some time with them, but only “if the Lord permits” (v. 7). Paul does not hesitate to outline priorities and to make plans, but he outlines all of those plans under the great recognition

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<sup>5</sup> Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 227–28.

<sup>6</sup> Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 363.

<sup>7</sup> John Willison, *A Treatise Concerning the Sanctification of the Lord’s Day* (Albany, NY: J. Boardman, 1820; Originally published in 1745), 47–48.

that the Lord may alter them.<sup>8</sup> Paul reflects the same balance when he identifies the reason he is not heading to Corinth now in v. 8–9. There, he speaks of his intention to stay in Ephesus until Pentecost because “a wide door for effective work has opened” for him—that is, that *God* has opened that wide door for effective work. Further, Paul recognizes the importance of work by identifying a number of adversaries that would hinder the spread of the gospel of Jesus. Paul makes his plans according to God-created opportunity and in light of sin-inspired need.

Since Paul will be absent, the apostle recognizes that the Corinthian church needs ministers who can continue to shepherd the congregation. So, Paul sends his young protege Timothy, and he exhorts the Corinthians to do everything they can to help and encourage Timothy as he ministers among them (v. 10–11). In this context, Paul addresses the possible coming of Apollos. Again, Paul makes plans and pursues priorities, but he recognizes that ministry will not advance exactly as he anticipates. In the case of Apollos, Paul writes that “it was not at all his will to come now” (v. 12). It is unclear whether “his” refers to God’s will, or to Apollos’s will.<sup>9</sup> Regardless, Paul recognizes this delay not as a setback to his own plans, but simply the timing that God has ordained: Apollos “will come when he has opportunity” (v. 12).

There are two main points we should take from this ministry management Paul outlines. First, we should notice that Paul, Timothy, and Apollos are all ministers who preach the word of God (cf. Acts 18:24–28; 1 Cor. 2:1–5; 3:6; 1 Tim. 4:11–16; 2 Tim. 4:1–5). Preaching of the word of God is an indispensable part of the church, and the only means for building the church up in the message of the cross, which is the wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:18–2:16). If Paul cannot be among the Corinthians to preach the gospel, he insists that someone must go for him. Second, Paul does not send ministers that will preserve his ego or territorial pride; instead, Paul does whatever it takes to build the church up in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Along these lines, we should not forget that the Corinthians pitted Paul against Apollos (1 Cor. 1:12). As Gordon Fee observes, “If the church in Corinth were Paul’s, the last person in the world he would want to return would be Apollos.”<sup>10</sup> Instead, Paul *urges* Apollos to minister among the Corinthians, for he recognizes that he and Apollos are *both* nothing more than servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God (1 Cor. 3:5–4:1).

In the meantime, Paul exhorts the Corinthians to “be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong” (v. 13). To this exhortation, Paul adds, “let all that you do be done in love” (v. 14). The Corinthians had no lack of brash confidence that seemed to them strength; however, they were lacking the kind of strength that operates from love. While these points could be applied to a variety of churches, they are specifically fitted to summarize all that Paul has addressed in this letter.<sup>11</sup> Then, Paul commends the household of Stephanas, along with Fortunatus and Achaicus for the subjection and recognition of the Corinthians (v. 15–18). We should probably understand Paul’s identification of these people as individuals who embody the values Paul listed in v. 13–14 an exemplary way. The church needs pastors who lead by preaching the word of God; however, the church also needs those who lead by example, putting God’s word into practice.

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<sup>8</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 2, 71. Available online: <<https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom40/calcom40.ii.i.html>>

<sup>9</sup> Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 762.

<sup>10</sup> Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 911–12.

<sup>11</sup> Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 369.

## Our Common Hope (1 Cor. 16:19–24)

Paul closes this letter with reminders of the great unity within the church, and of our great hope of the return of Christ. So, Paul passes along greetings from the churches in the region of Asia (v. 19a). Specifically, Paul gives greeting from Aquila and Prisca, along with the “church in their house”—that is, with the congregation of Christians who gathered to worship in the home of Aquila and Prisca.<sup>12</sup> To this, Paul adds that “All the brothers send you greetings. Greet one another with a holy kiss” (v. 20). All Christians—both those from churches who are far off, and those Christians whom we greet weekly with a holy kiss—share a deep unity. In the midst of deep divisions and factions within the Corinthian church (1 Cor. 1:10–17; 3:1–4), this reminder was important for preserving their unity. Indeed, this reminder is important for every age of the church, for the cares of this world can so easily divide us.

In v. 22, after adding a greeting written in his own hand (rather than by someone dictating his words; v. 21), Paul issues a warning and offers a prayer: “If anyone has no love for the Lord, let him be accursed. Our Lord, come!” Both of these carry forward everything that Paul wrote in chapter 15, when he described the events leading up to the return of Christ and the final resurrection. In light of that imminent return, we must realize that anyone who does not love the Lord will be accursed. On the other hand, all those Christians who do love the Lord may join with Paul to pray for the Lord’s return, when he will finalize his work of putting all his enemies under his feet (1 Cor. 15:25).

Finally, Paul closes his letter with a benediction (“The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you”; v. 23) and a pledge of his own love (“My love be with you all in Christ Jesus. Amen”; v. 24). While Paul has confronted the Corinthians with several serious errors that have arisen in their midst, he does not want them to forget that he loves them, and much less does he want them to lose sight of the fact that *Jesus* loves them. This is the posture of a faithful pastor to a wandering congregation, willing to confront sin, but quick to build people up in encouragement and love—all the while pointing the flock to Christ, and not to himself. May the church of Jesus Christ continue in these faithful words until our Lord returns.

Our Lord, come!

## Discussion Questions

1. What does Paul prioritize in the instructions he gives about the collection for the church in Jerusalem (1 Cor. 16:1–4)? What does this collection suggest about the ongoing role that the ministry of mercy should play in the life of the church? Why is this ministry of mercy so important in the church? How did Christ model mercy ministry in his life? What role should the deacons play in mercy ministry? What role should the rest of the congregation play in mercy ministry?
2. What factors play into whether Paul will be able to visit Corinth (1 Cor. 16:5–9)? What is Paul anxious about for Timothy’s visit to Corinth (1 Cor. 16:10–11)? Why do you think this might be? What does this teach us in general about our relationship to pastors? Why is Paul so insistent on

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<sup>12</sup> Thiselton, *First Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical & Pastoral Commentary*, 300.

sending Apollos to Corinth, even when people pitted Paul against Apollos (1 Cor. 16:12; cf. 1 Cor. 3:1–9)? What does Paul's work in getting preachers to Corinth reflect about the ongoing role of the ministry of the word in the church?

3. How many greetings do we see in the final verses of this chapter (1 Cor. 16:19–21)? What do Paul's greetings suggest about the unity of the church? What role should greetings take within the life of a congregation (1 Cor. 16:20)? In 1 Corinthians 16:22, how does the warning in the first part of the verse relate to the prayer in the last half of the verse?

4. What have you learned from studying 1 Corinthians? What passages stand out in your memory? What questions do you still have about this letter? What is the single most important practical takeaway you have from this letter?