

Protect to Provide

Choosing Wisely When Culture Clashes, November 20 & 21 | 1 Corinthians 16:1-4
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NATURALLY, WE PROTECT OUR OWN INTERESTS

***Earth at Night in Color* shows a lioness doing what she does naturally, protecting her cubs.**

Earth at Night in Color uses special cameras that offer astounding detail even in extremely low-light conditions so that we can see the lives of animals that are awake and active while you and I are sleeping. Their worlds have been almost invisible to us in the past.

One episode follows a pride of lions in Africa hoping to find out more about how they live, socialize, and work together.

The pride includes a male lion, his mate, their adolescent children, and three young cubs.

The male patrols and secures the family's territory from rivals.

The lioness must hunt to provide food for the family.

To hunt, though, the lioness must leave her cubs alone and unprotected.

In this episode, when she was done hunting, the lioness came back to find her cubs. She growled to signal them to come out of hiding and find her.

She found one of the cubs. She kept growling. The other two were nowhere to be found.

What did she do? She kept growling and searching for four days.

I won't spoil the ending. The point is that the mother lion did what was natural. She protected her own interests, her cubs.

Naturally, we protect our own interests.

We forward our careers because that makes sense.

We work to get money and the things money provides for us like security.

We take care of the things we have and try to get more things.

It's easy for us to think about our own needs, our own resources, and our own futures.

It comes naturally to us to protect our own interests.

However, we know that our culture frequently clashes with our Christian faith.

As we have studied 1 Corinthians, we have seen repeatedly that the culture shaped the Christians in Corinth and us in surprising ways.

Some of the ways that our culture shapes us are neutral or even good.

However, some ways that our culture shapes us clash with our Christian faith.

As we think about the fact that we naturally protect our own interests, we certainly want to ask, "Does that fit with my Christian faith? Or does it clash?"

As we end our study of 1 Corinthians, the Apostle Paul calls us to make one more mental move.

Protecting our own interests can be good!

We're glad that the mother lion went searching for her cubs.

And it's a good thing that we work to provide a life and a future for ourselves and our families.

However, it's easy to take a good thing too far, and that can easily be the case here. We can easily protect our own interests in ways that neglect what God is doing in the world, and it is easy to prioritize protecting our own interests over pursuing God's interests.

Hence, as we study 1 Corinthians today, the Apostle Paul calls us to make one more CRITICAL mental move: **Let's move from protecting our own interests to providing for God's mission.**

PAUL CALLED THE CHRISTIANS IN CORINTH TO PROVIDE FOR GOD'S MISSION

Paul called the Christians in Corinth to take up an offering in 1 Corinthians 16:1-4:

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

Why was Paul taking up this offering?

The saints Paul is mentioning here in 1 Corinthians 16:1 are followers of Jesus in Jerusalem.

His servant-hearted attitude toward them went back at least as far as the early days of his public ministry. Paul began his public ministry when a Christian leader named Barnabas called him to Antioch in Syria to help build the church there.

A prophet in Antioch predicted a famine that would happen that would impoverish the Christians in Jerusalem. The Christians in Antioch took up an offering to help. Paul and Barnabas took the offering to Jerusalem.

Later, after Paul began his traveling ministry, conflict arose across the Christian movement about whether Gentiles needed to become Jews first in order to become Christians. Again, Paul went to Jerusalem. Paul walked away from the meeting hearing that the Church in Jerusalem expected him to continue his offer to help the struggling Christians of that city.

From that point forward, Paul was determined to collect this offering.

That's why Paul included these verses about the offering at the end of 1 Corinthians.

Paul called the Christians in Corinth to give joyfully.

What we have here is clearly not Paul's first mention of the offering.

This passage starts with the words "now concerning." Those words indicate that Paul had raised the subject earlier, the Christians in Corinth had asked for clarification, and Paul was now sending that clarification.

Verse 1 doesn't say exactly that Paul wanted the Christians in Corinth to give joyfully.

However, don't forget that Paul has communicated with them previously to explain the rationale. Here he is reminding them what to do and clarifying how they are to do it.

In **2 Corinthians 9:7** when Paul came back to the topic, he explained again how he hoped they would approach this offering. He wrote:

Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

Paul is saying that this kind of giving should be approached joyfully.

He called them to give systematically.

Look again at **1 Corinthians 16:2** where Paul writes:

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.

Paul knew that collecting money over time would yield a larger offering than taking it up all at once upon his arrival.

Paul is advocating regular, intentional giving. His principles are important for us as givers. We don't want to be occasional or haphazard givers. Instead, Christians are called to give regularly and intentionally, with a system. So, what is your system for giving?

I strongly urge tithing, i.e., giving 10% of our gross income as a starting point for obedient giving. Then we can be generous on top of our tithes.

And he called them to give confidently.

Look again at **1 Corinthians 16:3-4**:

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.

Paul was demonstrating trustworthiness with the funds the Christians in Corinth were giving.

Verse 2 told us that they themselves were taking the offering and storing it.

Here Paul is avoiding any impression of greed or impropriety on his part.

Instead, Paul set up a system whereby representatives from Corinth would handle the funds and carry them to Jerusalem. Paul might go along, but that would be decided later.

It turns out that security in giving is an important, biblical issue.

It's important for us as Christians to give when we do so to places that we know are secure.

Here at Valley, we have vigorous systems in place to ensure that money you give is received responsibly and spent in accountable ways.

Even in the first century Paul knew that security in handling funds would be important so that we can all give confidently.

THE CHRISTIANS IN CORINTH PROTECTED THEIR OWN INTERESTS

Corinth's history highlighted money as a measure of value.

Ancient Corinth was destroyed in 146 BC by the Romans.

The Romans built a new colony on the site of Ancient Corinth in 44 BC and called it Corinth. The people who built Corinth from 44 BC forward were merchants. Their power didn't come from land and generations of family connections as was the case everywhere else in the ancient world. Instead, their value and power came from their money. Money meant everything to them.

Corinth's economy emphasized money as a goal in transactions.

As I've told you repeatedly, Corinth was the epicenter of two critically important trade routes.

Ships wanting to get from the eastern edges of the Roman Empire would dock at Corinth's eastern port. If the ship was small enough, they would haul the ship out of the water, put it on wooden logs, and pull it across a stone highway called the diolkos to the western port where they would put the boat back in the water. They would save ships a great deal of time and take much of the risk out of shipping across water. And they would collect a fee for their service.

Everything imaginable in that day was available in Corinth. For a fee.

Corinthians became wealthy because they knew how to charge fees.

Corinth's society sought money as a key to mobility.

Corinth was a comparatively wealthy city.

However, there were still many artisans who were not in the merchant class, there were many people who had formerly been slaves, and there were still many slaves.

The money and opportunities in Corinth meant that people all had opportunities for advancement. However, many people started out life in Corinth poor and had to work their way up from the bottom.

Starting out on the bottom of the social ladder and working as hard as they could to build a more secure future for themselves meant that giving away the money they worked so hard to get did not come naturally to them. That was the history and culture of Corinth!

Corinth's culture clashed with Christian faith!

Christian faith calls us to a lifestyle of generosity.

But in Corinth's culture, giving felt like a very big stretch for many people.

Consequently, the Christians in Corinth chose to protect their own interests.

When Paul sent this call to give an offering, the Christians in Corinth pushed back. Hard.

After 1 Corinthians was delivered, there was a significant breach between the church in Corinth and the apostle who founded them.

They implied that Paul had turned churches into his very own profitable industry.

They accused him of using underhanded ways to get what he wanted.

The list of charges goes on. The bottom line is that for a season, the Christians in Corinth chose to protect their own interests.

JESUS REBALANCES OUR ECONOMY

Paul pressed the Christians in Corinth to reconsider this offering.

He pressed them to reconsider it **rationally**. Paul refuted the charges the Christians in Corinth made against him. In 2 Corinthians, Paul refuted one charge after another. Then in 2 Corinthians chapters 8 and 9, he laid out the case for why the offering was so important.

Paul pressed them to reconsider it **relationally**. In between 1 and 2 Corinthians, multiple letters and messengers went back and forth between Paul and Corinth. Paul even went to Corinth in person, trying to repair the damage and get the project back on track.

Then Paul pressed them to reconsider it **theologically**. He told them to make God's generosity to them the model for their own generosity. Furthermore, he told them that grace and wealth are both given to us that we might pass them along to others.

Our culture leaves us with some illusions about our own personal economies.

We plan as if we were poor but becoming wealthy. We think about our value through the wrong lens; we're consumed with our net worth, our stuff, the stuff our net worth can buy, and the security it can bring us. We plan on moving from less stuff to more. The myth our culture sells leaves us spending our lives chasing after the **wrong assets**.

We worry as if we were wealthy but might become poor. We worry that we might lose it all and be without. That's because our culture leaves us with the myth of scarcity. There's only so much stuff, I have some, but I might lose it. Our worries are driven by the **perspective of scarcity**.

Jesus exposes our illusions about our own personal economies.

Jesus shows us wealth on a much grander scale. Jesus possesses the wealth of heaven. The wealth of heaven is the glory of God, grace, adoption as children of God, life in the Holy Spirit, new life, eternal life, the future, and the power to make the future happen. Jesus possesses all that wealth.

Jesus shows us our own poverty on a much grander scale. Our poverty starts with the reality that our wealth—our money, power, stuff, and security—all look like dirty rags compared with the riches of heaven. Our true poverty is driven by the fact that we are covered in sin and cut off from the true wealth of Jesus on our own.

However, Jesus rebalances our economy.

First, Jesus traded his wealth for poverty. Jesus set aside the riches of heaven to take on the poverty of earth. He took on human flesh and experienced our poverty. Jesus became a peasant with very little of the stuff that we value. Then Jesus took human sin onto his shoulders and died on the cross to pay the price for our sin. Jesus traded his wealth for poverty.

Now, Jesus invites us to trade our poverty for his wealth. In dying on the cross, Jesus created value; in a sense, he created a bank of grace and forgiveness and made an infinite deposit into that bank. Now Jesus invites us to give him our sin. On top of that, Jesus invites us to give him our entire twisted economic outlook—our wrong assets, our perspective of scarcity. In exchange, Jesus gives us forgiveness from his treasury of merit. That forgiveness cleanses us of our sin. Along with forgiveness, Jesus offers us grace, new life, adoption as children of God, life in the Holy Spirit, new purpose, a future, and eternal life. It's more than we ever wanted.

2 Corinthians 8:9 explains how Jesus rebalances our economies:

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.

Which leads to an invitation: If you have never accepted Jesus and his rebalancing of your personal economy, then right now is the time to accept him.

It also leads to an implication: If you have accepted Jesus, then your balance sheet is fine. You don't have to spend your days protecting your assets.

LET'S PROVIDE FOR GOD'S MISSION

As we let go of our need to protect our own interests, we embrace God's mission.

God is on a mission. He is on a mission to redeem his people for himself.

When we accept Jesus' economics, God's mission becomes our mission. We join the family business if you will. God's mission is now our mission.

If we join that business and own that mission, then we provide for it.

We learn the lesson that lioness demonstrated.

She searched for her cubs by day and night for four straight days.

If you were that lioness, would you have done anything differently? Of course not.

Why? Because those cubs are yours. They are precious to you. You would do whatever you had to do to protect and provide for them.

In the same way, God's mission has now become your mission.

Of course, you will invest in and provide for God's mission.

It's not a problem. It's an imperative. It's a privilege.

Eventually, the church in Corinth generously supported the offering for the poor saints in Jerusalem.

Just before leaving for Jerusalem with his final collection for the poor among the Christians there, Paul wrote to the church in Rome to tell them about it all and to indicate that he hoped to visit them after delivering the proceeds. In **Romans 15:25-27**, Paul writes:

At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints. For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. For they were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings.

Corinth was the capital of Achaia. Eventually, after God did what amounted to heart surgery on their souls to set them free from the myths of their culture that bound them, the Christians in Corinth generously supported the offering for the poor in Jerusalem.

Let's make this final, critical mental move.

We don't need to waste our lives protecting our own interests; Jesus has rebalanced our economy.

Instead, we have come to own God's mission; God's mission is our mission.

When we are generous with our time, talents, treasures, we provide for God's mission.

Let's move from protecting our own interests to providing for God's mission.