

Series: **AND FINALLY...--June 22, 2008**

**AND FINALLY...
1 Corinthians 16**

I. INTRO

- A. I have an image that I want to show to you this morning to start things off—but I have to give you a warning. This is 14A stuff—maybe too frightening and disturbing for many of you. If you have children here, please have them cover their eyes. Okay—ready?
1. That is a **frightening** picture isn't it? \$1.34 per litre. \$5.36 per gallon U.S.! People in the media are **experts** at creating fear—and they're doing a fantastic job at scaring people with this one. Have you heard the rhetoric? That by the end of the summer it will be \$1.80 per gallon. That the economy is in a downturn anyway. Of course, it takes fuel to produce grain, crops—and ship them all.
 2. Fear keeps politicians in office—or out of office. Fear is at the core of the insurance industry, the RRSP industry, the vitamin industry—name it, and fear probably has a part in it.
 3. I know this. Fear—especially financial fear—is a monster that takes ground and rarely gives any back. Unless you walk toward it, face it down, and break its back, fear will cripple you—and keep you from being the person you long to be.
- B. As followers of Jesus, a huge part of our calling is to be **generous** people. In Paul's closing comments to this church in Corinth, he urges them to be generous with a group of people in genuine need—people the whole Christian community had agreed to help. This is what he says:

**Now regarding your question about the money being collected for God's people in Jerusalem. You should follow the same procedure I gave to the churches in Galatia. On the first day of each week, you should each put aside a portion of the money you have earned. Don't wait until I get there and then try to collect it all at once. When I come, I will write letters of recommendation for the messengers you choose to deliver your gift to Jerusalem. And if it seems appropriate for me to go along, they can travel with me.
(1 Corinthians 16:1-4 NLT)**

1. How many of you think the people from this church in Corinth said, "**Cool!** We get to help!" If you voted "yes"—you're wrong. They had all apparently agreed to do it—and they had the **means** to do it. But in the next letter, Paul has to ask them again.
2. Why? I think they were just like us. They were afraid. Not only is fear irrational—fear is a thief. Fear steals our sleep—steals our joy--and steals food and help from those who need it. And I think it's time to put the **REAL thief** in prison. And I think it's time we were free to be generous--and make the difference we were created to

make. Do you agree? If you don't—at least hear me out—then shoot me.
Agreed?

II. **BELIEVING WHAT YOU BELIEVE**

A. In this past year, we've taken a walk—a **long** walk—through this 16 chapter letter that the Apostle Paul wrote to a very troubled church in Corinth. They were arrogant, self-pre-occupied, in sexual trouble, drunk at the communion table. You'd think that maybe Paul, in this final chapter, would give them some final warnings about all that. But he doesn't. He makes some personal comments about mutual friends they had—and then mentions two things; being generous, and living with courageous love.

1. First, let me give a little background on this collection Paul has assumed they're on board with for Jerusalem. The books of Acts tells us how a prophet had told the church that there would be a famine in Judea. The church immediately put a plan into action to help—no sad pictures, no one begging and pleading—nothing. The **immediate** response of their heart was, "We've got money and stuff—**let's help!**" And this was apparently a regular occurrence. An early record gives us some insight into their hearts.

All the believers were united in heart and mind. And they felt that what they owned was not their own, so they shared everything they had...There were no needy people among them, because those who owned land or houses would sell them and bring the money to the apostles to give to those in need. (Acts 4:32, 34-35 NLT)

2. You have to understand—generosity—consuming less to give more is not some new teaching. The Old Testament is **full** of teaching about caring for the poor, about social justice, about helping the widows and orphans and showing mercy and kindness to the aliens and to those who are down and out.

-Jesus was very clear that this attitude of love and compassion and generosity was to characterize His Followers.

That how we cared for the poor and homeless and sick and hungry reflected would be a clear indication of how we feel about Him!

-Jesus continually addressed this issue of fear. Don't worry, be generous! It's okay! Sell your possessions, if necessary—and give to the poor. He said, "It's okay to do this! Don't be afraid! When you give—God will take care of your needs—and pour out more for you to give away!"

3. That's the legacy Paul passed on when he first told these people in Corinth about Jesus. And that's my take on why his reference to their giving to the poor in Jerusalem seems kind of casual. "Oh, by the way—just set the money aside week by week—and when I get there, we'll make arrangements to get it to where it needs to go. No problemo!" Actually, he didn't say, "No problemo"—he couldn't speak Spanish.

-So. Did it actually happen? No. They over-promised and under-delivered. And Paul takes quite a bit of space—simply urging them to do what they **said** they would do. He tells them, “you folks excel in **so** many ways—in faith, spiritual gifts and enthusiasm.”

...Now I want you to excel also in this gracious act of giving. I am not commanding you to do this. But I am testing how genuine your love is by comparing it with the eagerness of the other churches. You know the generous grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty he could make you rich. Here is my advice: It would be good for you to finish what you started a year ago. (2 Corinthians 8:7b-10a NLT)

And it's in these verses that the Spirit of God gets **right** to the roots of what we believe about God, what we believe about what we have, and what we believe about generosity.

B. How many of you have ever been the recipient of someone else's generosity? What did it **feel** like? I think most people **long** to be generous. Know why it **feels** good? Because it **is** good. That's what God is like. Here's the question: Why is it such a struggle?

1. I think most people in North America would be hard put to say, “Well, I didn't know there was a need.” It's in our faces every day. Compared to the world, we live like royalty. My guess is that in this part of the GTA, we have more—**way** more—than 95% of the world. When it comes to money, homes, food, cars, etc.—we're in the top 10% worldwide—probably the top 5%.

-And it doesn't take much searching to see the agony of our world. Almost 30,000 children die of hunger related causes every day. 10 million a year. And that doesn't even cover AIDS or preventable diseases. And it hits close to home. Walk the back alleys of Toronto—and you'll see that poverty stalks the people here, too.

-Equity? That's getting worse. Social justice? The chance of people in poverty escaping the systems they're stuck in? That's worse too.

2. Now, here's the shocking part of all this—and I'm not telling you something you don't know.

High gas prices and higher food prices, even though they're scary, are not going to reduce **us** to poverty, okay? We may have to buy less pizza and Starbucks—and wait another year to replace a car—or a boat. But no one here will starve or have to go without medicine.

-But, truth is, stats show that we are not very generous people. Our grandparents—and great-grandparents went through the Great Depression here in North America. Did you know that during the Depression they gave more than we do now? We tend to think, “Well, if I had more, I'd give more.” It's the old prayer, “God, if you let me win the lottery—I'll be **so** generous!”

Stats say that people who have less—live near the poverty line—give **way** more proportionately than the people who have a lot.

-**Why?** Is it greed? Maybe. Self-centeredness—**you deserve it! Me seek cookie! Me want cookie! Me EAT cookie!** We **do** tend to spend money we don't even have to buy things we don't even need to impress people we don't even like. But I think the **biggest** problem is fear. Self-preservation. We're afraid that we won't have enough. And every day, the media fans the flames of fear.

-This group? Here at The Olive Branch? At the core, I don't think we're selfish or greedy. But we **are** afraid. The Bible says that **Fear does not come from God**. In fact--fear is one of Satan's most effective weapons.

3. So, let's talk about fear a little. Paul, in trying to restart generosity that's flamed out compares giving to a farmer planting his fields.

Remember this—a farmer who plants only a few seeds will get a small crop. But the one who plants generously will get a generous crop. You must each decide in your heart how much to give. And don't give reluctantly or in response to pressure. "For God loves a person who gives cheerfully." And God will generously provide all you need. Then you will always have everything you need and plenty left over to share with others. As the Scriptures say, "They share freely and give generously to the poor. Their good deeds will be remembered forever." For God is the one who provides seed for the farmer and then bread to eat. In the same way, he will provide and increase your resources and then produce a great harvest of generosity in you. (2 Corinthians 9:6-10 NLT)

- a. Paul calls up an image most of them would be familiar with. Farming. Anyone here raised on a farm? Anyone here know what **happens** on a farm? Well, they plow fields, they plant seeds, they fertilize and weed—and then they harvest—corn, soybeans, shrink-wrapped meat—you know.

-Paul says, "If a farmer plants **two** acres—guess how much he harvests? Two acres worth. If he plants 5 acres—he harvests...**five** acres! What if he's afraid of losing the seed and doesn't plant anything? Nothing.
- b. Paul is clearly saying that our giving is like planting seed. If we don't do it—nothing happens. Now, you really need to be careful with this—because there is a lot of misuse of this imagery.

"God wants you rich—but you gotta plant the seed! Send your seed to me—and God will make you rich."

-That's not what this passage is saying. It's saying that the point, as **Jesus** put it, is to rich toward God—and He would meet **all** of your needs. How many of you know the difference between **needs** and **wants**? I hope you do! And notice from this passage **why** God pours resources out to those who give.

For God is the one who provides seed for the farmer and then bread to eat. In the same way, he will provide and increase your resources and then produce a great harvest of generosity in you. (2 Corinthians 9:10 NLT)

-Friends—hear me on this--we have **one** chance to plant—to be generous—and it's **now!** And the question we have to answer in our hearts when it comes to fear is, “Can God be trusted? The entire message of the Old Testament is, “Try Him. Go ahead. See if He keeps promises. If never try—you'll never know! Giving is an act of obedience. So—refusing to give would be...?”

-Paul says, “Are you gonna plant—or are you gonna hoard the seed and eat it all yourself because you're afraid.” If you will plant...well, then God will **resupply** your stockpile so you can give more. If you refuse—well, you've just shoved God out of your financial plan. Not a good thing to do, I wouldn't think. Here's the point:
If we won't obey Him with what we have—and show compassion for people He loves and advance what He's up to—why should He give us more?

4. Friends, let me tell you where this hits me—and maybe where it hits us all. Do we believe what we **say** we believe? Do we **believe...**like **BELIEVE** what we say we believe? About God—that He generous and compassionate and absolutely truthful? Do we believe that Jesus is the Son of God—and that he told the truth about money and stuff? That when he tells his followers to put God's Kingdom **first**—not second, third, fifth or twentieth on their list of priorities—that **all the things we need will be GIVEN to us?**

-Do we believe that God is, at heart, a **Giver**—absolutely generous—and the more we are like Him, the more blessed we'll be? Do we believe that God has the capacity and desire to replace what we give—so we can give more?

-Here's another one—it's tough—and let me make it personal. Do you believe that God is the Owner—and you're the manager? And, as a faithful manager—He calls you to use what He's given you in a way that pleases Him? Do we believe that life here is a blip; that this isn't our final home—and to gold-plate it is ridiculous?

-It's quite safe to have a little Bible study and debate this stuff as great ideas—**wonderful** principles for humanity! For **other** people. It's quite another to go out on a limb, overcome our fear of not having enough—and **actually do what the Bible says!** By the way—where does **fruit** grow? Not on the trunk. It's always way out on a limb somewhere! Limbs are scary places! Anyone here who would like to be freed from fear?

III. **WAITING FOR THE FEAR TO GO AWAY**

- A. A few weeks ago, Paul gave a great message about heights and diving boards and diving, right? About how he went up to the high dive, chickened out—but couldn't get off. So he jumped. And actually found it **exhilarating!**

-Let's talk about fear. How many of you think that if a chicken--like Paul (cluck! cluck!)-were to come and sit and watch the diving board, study the diving board, learn the physics of a diving board and watch 100s of people jump off the diving board—the fear would just go away? Fear doesn't even stay put--it **takes** ground!

-See, fear doesn't just go away if you wait and tap your feet. Fear can outwait you. The only way to deal with fear is to walk toward it. And the truth is that **fear**, not **faith** determines most people's giving threshold.

1. We all **want** to be generous. We all **believe** it's unacceptable that God's work on this planet take a back seat to what we're doing. We all **agree** that compassion is beautiful and essential—and what God wants to see in human hearts. Right?

-Remember Jesus' story about the rich fool? The guy who's solution to plenty was to build bigger barns so he could keep it all for himself? Who died—and had God write, **FOOL!** Over his life?

-Well, Jesus had been talking about fear **before** that—and that's what he addressed after this story. He specifically warned His followers about worry. About not getting obsessed with the next meal, the next set of clothes they'd drape over their bodies. He said, "You've got a Father in Heaven who's **crazy** about you! Then these words:

Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and he will give you everything you need. "So don't be afraid, little flock. For it gives your Father great happiness to give you the Kingdom. "Sell your possessions and give to those in need. This will store up treasure for you in heaven! And the purses of heaven never get old or develop holes. Your treasure will be safe; no thief can steal it and no moth can destroy it. Wherever your treasure is, there the desires of your heart will also be.
(Luke 12:31-34 NLT)

-In my opinion, either Jesus was seriously out of touch with reality—or he was teaching us a profound truth that exposes everything we hear every day. I believe Jesus was telling the absolute truth. I believe Jesus was giving us a **huge** clue to happiness—and peace when he said that it is better to **give** than to **receive**.

-How do you get there? Well, **faith**. Faith is actually not that uncommon. We exercise faith when we walk onto a plane—even if you're afraid. You walk right toward your fear of not having enough, believing that Jesus is telling the truth—not the 11:00 news. By the way--the little raspy voice inside that says, "Better

worry! Better not give! Better hold on to it...!” is a liar. And God doesn’t lie. Never has. Never will.

2. Maybe that’s why Paul, after talking about generosity, records these words at the end of this letter:

Be on guard. Stand true to *what you believe*. Be courageous. Be strong. And everything you do must be done with love.
(1 Corinthians 16:13-14 NLT)

-These words of encouragement would certainly apply in this whole area of generosity, wouldn’t they?

- a. Be on guard...against what? Lies. Untruths. Half-truths. The things Satan says that keep us from being the persons we want to become—living free of fear.
- b. **Stand true to what you believe.** What we *really* believe, friends, gets tested. And money, resources, time—are where the rubber meets the road. What do you *really* believe? My schedule, my bank account, and my lifestyle declares what I *really* believe about life, about faith, and about what really matters.

-**Stand true!** The call here is, “Don’t be a hypocrite! Don’t cave to lies. Align your life and your values and your lifestyle with what God has to say!

- c. **Be courageous! Be strong!** Man, that’s what I want, don’t you? I’d like to think that when push comes to shove, I would be willing to stand up to whatever—die for my faith in Jesus! That I would be unstoppable! -Know what I think? I think it’s probably harder to *live* for Jesus than *die* for Him. It takes *courage* and *strength* to lay what I have on the line and declare Jesus as *Lord* of all I am and all I have.
- d. And it takes love. **And everything you do must be done with love.** We tend to relegate that to *not* being nasty with others. But, see, love is not just not doing nasty things; love involves lifestyle choices that allow me to help others. Biblical love involves, not just my heart—but my time and money.

-I have what I have *only, ONLY* because a loving God has entrusted it into my hands and waits to see if I will love someone besides myself with it. I am only a *manager*—a *manager* of His resources. And one day I will give an account for what I’ve done with it. And so will you!

3. In his book, *Fields of Gold*, Andy Stanley says that the fear of giving never goes away completely. The way to deal with it is to replace it with a greater fear. And that would be the fear of shutting God’s blessing on the whole financial arena of my life.

-When we give more than our leftovers—when we cultivate a generous heart that **chooses** obedience in this area of giving, that is like sending God an engraved invitation, asking Him to bless what we have and be involved in our finances. Read through the Bible. You'll see this over and over and over again. And it's actually very clear in what Paul writes to these people in Corinth:

You must each decide in your heart how much to give. And don't give reluctantly or in response to pressure. "For God loves a person who gives cheerfully." And God will generously provide all you need. Then you will always have everything you need and plenty left over to share with others. As the Scriptures say, "They share freely and give generously to the poor. Their good deeds will be remembered forever." For God is the one who provides seed for the farmer and then bread to eat. In the same way, he will provide and increase your resources and then produce a great harvest of generosity in you. Yes, you will be enriched in every way so that you can always be generous.
(2 Corinthians 9:7-11 NLT)

-There's quite a bit of teaching going around that says that if you give, God will make you rich. That's **not** what this is teaching. God **never** blesses greed! God blesses generosity. He gives us what we **need**—did you hear the word—not "everything we want"—what we **need**, and then more to give away. And when you give, it brings incredible joy and satisfaction. And it blesses others—and **they** are grateful. It starts this cycle of blessing that's nothing short of amazing!

-Fear—the fear of not having enough--**what if**—stops giving. Wilts it. And sometimes the only way God can get our attention is to let us know that **our** plan will never work! Like, we hit the wall and pray, **Oh, God! HELP!**

B. **So—HOW?** How do you walk toward your fear? What does it look like? There are some fantastic guidelines.

1. The first step toward fear is this: **You must each decide in your heart how much to give. (2 Corinthians 9:7 NLT)** Your heart is the place where you make your decisions about how you will live your life. It's your **will**.
-Know why you and I need to go there? Because, when it comes to fear, emotions/feelings are irrational. Think about it for a minute. What would a person who's placed their eternity in God's hands **not** trust Him with something stupid like money? Does that even make sense? Does it? Of course not—so, as an act of your will—you have to set the course for generosity.
2. Second thing, don't give because **anyone** coerces you into it. Do it because it's the **right** thing to do. For you. For God. And for those God loves who are in desperate physical and spiritual need. Ultimately, when you break through the fear—and see what God does—it brings **joy!**
3. Paul gives some additional guidelines in giving that are brilliant—and practical.

Give in proportion to what you have. Whatever you give is acceptable if you give it eagerly. And give according to what you have, not what you don't have. Of course, I don't mean your giving should make life easy for others and hard for yourselves. I only mean that there should be some equality. Right now you have plenty and can help those who are in need. Later, they will have plenty and can share with you when you need it. In this way, things will be equal. As the Scriptures say, "Those who gathered a lot had nothing left over, and those who gathered only a little had enough. (2 Corinthians 8:11b-15 NLT)

- a. How much? Well, **in proportion to what you have**. And what **do** we have? Friends, we just need to be honest about this. Don't compare yourself with wealthier people. We have a **lot**. Give what you have—not what you **don't** have.

-If you don't start with a percentage—well, then you'll get into scraping leftovers off your plate—like God is the family dog or something. The starting point that is suggested throughout the entire Bible—before the giving of the law—is a tithe, or a tenth.

-The New Testament doesn't command anything—**except** generosity. If you're scared, start lower—say at 5%. The fear won't go away until you feel a little pain in giving.

- b. And Paul is **very** practical. He says, "I'm not trying to make you suffer while others live on easy street!" But the actual truth is—we tend to live on easy street—and just keep stuffing our homes, bank accounts and garages with more while others suffer.

- c. The final step is that you have to actually **do** it. See, I haven't found a way to become a generous person—without actually giving. Usually giving until I feel some pain. And there's a prayer that usually goes up, "Okay, God—it's time for you to show up!" **And He does!**

-Can I just give you my personal testimony on this? I've been practicing this for over 35 years—and it's absolutely true. It was true when I was making \$2 an hour as a security guard,—and \$165 a week as a youth pastor—right up to the present. I'm not sure **how**, but God pours more and more into our lives!

4. This morning, with absolutely no reservations--I want to **challenge** you to face your fear of giving with action. Decide in your heart what God is urging you to give as an act of obedience. Then do it. Today. Don't wait, cause you'll chicken out. If you wait for the fear to go away—you'll get stuck—and you'll **stay** stuck. You have to walk toward it.

-And if you've been doing 10% so long you don't even notice it any more—it's time to notice it—to bump it up and exercise faith again. I think it's a mistake to limit giving to 10%. Bump it up until you feel a little fear—and walk toward it.

-And I'll give the same guarantee I always do. Choose generosity in your heart—choose to give a tenth for six months; and if you find yourself impoverished, tell me. I'll personally refund any money you've given. How's that?

-And if you think that this is just a fundraising thing for The Olive Branch—give it somewhere else. There are lots of great organizations doing great things. Choose one. Then give—and give consistently. And watch what God does—and feel the joy—and **grab** your freedom!

5. Why? Why should you take hard earned money—and just...**give it away?** Because it honors God. Because you can take the same stuff people cheat and kill for—and make a difference forever. Because giving is an act of gratitude for all God has given you. Because God calls you to be like Him—and He is a **generous** God, willing to give His Son to save us. Because you and I are **not** owners of what we have, only caretakers. And because the inequity in our world—and the poverty—is shameful to us and to God. He has given us what we have to **share!**

-And...because the reward way, **way, WAY** outstrips what we give. Imagine—on another day—on another shore—when money and stuff is useless and worthless—meeting people whose lives—whose eternities were changed! Simply because you were willing to face your fear and part with a little of what this world says is more important than God Himself.

IV. CLOSING

- A. Today we're going to take Communion. Jesus told us to remember his sacrifice. Regularly. In my opinion—it's pretty hard to stand and look at someone giving his life for the people of this world—then walk away and say, "Okay. Got what **I** want!" God is a **Giver**. He gave what cost Him most. And we are at our best—and find our deepest joy—when we are like Him.
- B. Don't let fear keep you from becoming the person you want to become—you **need** to become! Because some day you will understand. Your greatest joy will come from what you gave—not what you got. And if that doesn't happen today—then...**when?** Remember...be strong. Alert. Courageous. **Believe!** And do **everything** with love.