

# The Brown Street Beacon

*“...Shine out among them like beacon lights,  
holding out to them the Word of Life” (Phil 2:15-16)*



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## Limited Benevolence

The work of the church is threefold—evangelism, edification and benevolence (Ephesians 4:11-12). The benevolence is referred to by Paul as “the work of ministry.” The Greek word for ministry is diakonia and refers to service, serving, or the ministering relief, especially in the form of provisions for living. That provision might come in the form of food, clothing, shelter, or financial relief. While providing benevolence is the work of the church, in the local sense, that work is limited in nature. Now, let me be clear about this: individual Christians, that is, those who make up the universal church, are free, and even obligated, to minister to all. Paul said, “*So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good **to everyone**, and especially to those who are of the household of faith (Galatians 6:10).*” With regard to local churches, that is, congregations of God’s people who decide to work together in a specific geographical location (Philippians 1:1), the work of ministry only involves relieving those who are saints.

Why was the benevolent work done by local churches in the first century limited to members of the church? That is a question we can’t answer because the Bible doesn’t say. We do know that it was limited because there is not a single example of a local church trying to solve the problem of poverty in the world by giving to the poor. In every case of benevolence, we find the church specifically relieving saints only. Allow me to list every passage where we find a congregation of God’s people involved in benevolence.

Acts 2:44-45

44 Now **all who believed** were together, and had all things in common, 45 and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need.

Acts 4:34-35

34 There was not a needy person **among them**, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold 35 and laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

Acts 11:27-30

27 Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. 28 And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world (this took place in the days of Claudius). 29 So the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, **to send relief to the brothers** living in Judea. 30 And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.

Romans 15:25-26

25 At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem **bringing aid to the saints**. 26 For Macedonia and Achaia

have been pleased to make some contribution **for the poor among the saints** at Jerusalem.

1 Corinthians 16:1-2

1 Now concerning **the collection for the saints**: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do.  
2 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.

2 Corinthians 8:1-4

1 We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, 2 for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. 3 For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, 4 begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part **in the relief of the saints**—

2 Corinthians 9:1

1 Now it is superfluous for me to write to you about the **ministry for the saints**,

That's it! Every passage we have showing local churches engaging in benevolence, at least so far as relieving the needy goes, and in every case, relief was given to saints. It is not our job to explain why. It is our job to follow the pattern (Hebrews 8:1-5). However, that is not to say that we can't see the logic in the Biblical arrangement. We can. Perhaps, God didn't want the church to be what religious groups have become in the world today, that is, glorified social clubs. Furthermore, it makes sense that God wanted Christians to understand that they had an individual responsibility to help the poor out of their own means, not run to the church every time a need came up. Nevertheless, whatever God's reason is for limiting the work that local churches do in regard to benevolence, we must only do what we have authority to do by the approved example found in scripture (Colossians 3:17).

A good passage to show us our individual responsibility with regard to helping the hurting of the world is Galatians 6:10. There Paul commands that we "*do good to everyone...*" Thus, as individual Christians, we must help anyone who is in need when the opportunity presents itself. Some have attempted to use this passage to show authority for the church engaging in unlimited benevolence. The argument is that since Paul was writing to a local church, what he wrote in Galatians 6:10 is applicable to the local church. Contextually, however, it is clear that Paul is addressing individual action.

6:1-9 — 1 Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, **you** who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on **yourself**, lest **you** too be tempted. 2 Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. 3 For if **anyone** thinks **he** is something, when **he** is nothing, **he** deceives **himself**. 4 But let **each one** test **his own** work, and then **his** reason to boast will be in **himself** alone and not in **his** neighbor. 5 For each will have to bear **his own** load. 6 Let the **one** who is taught the word share all good things with the **one** who teaches. 7 Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever **one** sows, that will **he** also reap. 8 For the **one** who sows to **his own flesh** will from the flesh reap corruption, but the **one** who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. 9 And let **us** not grow weary of doing good, for in due season **we** will reap, if **we** do not give up.

Who is Paul referring to as "giving up" here—the local church or individuals in the local church? The answer is clear, is it not? Go through the passage and ask yourself that question with regard to every instruction that Paul gives in this context. It will be clearly seen that Paul is not speaking of church action, but rather how individuals in the church should act. Such is the case in ver. 10 as well.

When an individual in the church sees someone in need, he or she is to not grow weary in well-doing. Meanwhile, the church should continue to use the Lord's money to relieve saints. This is really the difference in the two scenarios. When it comes to helping those of the world, we are to sacrifice and use our own money to help if we can. When it comes to needy saints, we have the authority to use the Lord's money to offer benevolence. It is as simple as that. Let's continue to do all things according to the pattern.

*Don*