

Thankfulness

Date: 22 January 2023 (Epiphany 3)

Series: Generous - the Bible on Wealth

Location: St George's Battery Point

Texts: 1 Chronicles 29:6-20; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

Today we're beginning a new series called Generous. 4 sermons Biblical principles about wealth and possessions. Money is a gift from God. We all use it. With money we can buy things that we need. Education. Health care. Meeting people who can open doors. Enjoying a life of ease and comfort. All of these come from wealth. And yet wealth can present us with grave spiritual danger. Moses warned Israel that when they became prosperous they would be tempted to say, "My power and strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me," and so forget that it is God who gives the ability to produce wealth.¹

According to Jesus, wealth and possessions can weigh us down and shut our hearts against compassion and generosity. You'd think that the more we have the more generous we'd be. But so often the reverse is true. We see this in the encounter Jesus had with the rich young ruler. He's a good man. He does the right thing. He honours his parents, he doesn't murder, lie, defraud or sleep around. And yet he comes to Jesus spiritually empty. Jesus' words to him expose his spiritual poverty. "One thing you lack. Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come follow me." He goes away sad because he has great wealth.² He couldn't follow Jesus *because* he had great wealth. His wealth controlled him. He wasn't free.

I've entitled this series *Generous*, because this is at the heart of the Bible's teaching on money. To be generous, is to be free. The person who has much *and also* gives away much has broken free from the tight-fistedness that so often results from having much. In the 4th century, the wealthiest woman in Rome was an aristocrat by the name of Fabiola. When she became a Christian she shocked the city by selling her vast estates and starting the first public hospital in Europe. We hear stories like Fabiola's and think, wow! That is beautiful. That's someone living in freedom. That's someone who has received much and not let it harden her heart to others or tighten her grip on what she has. Instead, her wealth did what it's meant to do; put her in a position to be generous.

Living in generosity is living in freedom. My prayer is that God begins to grow generosity in us over the next 4 weeks.

¹ Deuteronomy 8.10-18

² Mark 10.17-22

Each week we'll contrast our theme virtue with its opposite. Today's theme is thankfulness. Thankfulness is the counter to the vice of entitlement. We live in an age of entitlement. It can be so easy to have that attitude which says "the world owes me", "I deserve better". I think of that L'Oreal slogan - "Because you're worth it". Whatever the particular focus, somebody with an 'entitlement complex' is rarely satisfied and often complains. At its root entitlement is to "*grumble about blessings not received instead of being grateful for those we have received.*"

And there's a spiritual version too: an assumption that it's God's job to create a world in which things benefit *us*. Tim Keller writes:

The implicit but strong cultural assumption of young adults is that God owes all but the most villainous people a comfortable life. Though, believing this inevitably leads to bitter disappointment. Life is nasty, brutish, and always feels too short. Spiritual entitlement dooms its bearers to a life of confusion when things in life inevitably go wrong.³

Jackie's sermons on Job have helped us think about how to live a life of faith in the face of suffering, and we'll here more about that with her final sermon next week. But the starting point to combat entitlement is to cultivate thankfulness. So for the remainder of the sermon we'll look at 3 points: What is thankfulness? Why be thankful? How to be thankful?

What is thankfulness?

What is thankfulness or gratitude?

The world-renowned gratitude expert – Robert Emmons (who happens to be a Christian) – says there are 2 key components to gratitude:

1. First, there's the affirmation of goodness: i.e. we affirm that there are good things in the world, gifts and benefits that we've received. This doesn't mean that life is perfect; it doesn't ignore complaints, burdens, and hassles. But when we look at life as a whole, gratitude encourages us to identify some amount of goodness in our life.
2. The second part of gratitude is "figuring out where that goodness comes from." We need to recognize that the *sources* of this goodness are *outside ourselves*. ... that other people— or even higher powers, if you're of a spiritual mindset— *gave us* many gifts, big and small, to help us achieve the goodness in our lives.⁴

Having an attitude of gratitude is something you can cultivate. And it makes a difference.

There was a woman I used to visit. Every time I dropped in she would spend 2 hours

³ Tim Keller, *Walking With God Through Pain and Suffering*, Hodder, 2013:115

⁴ Robert Emmons, 'Why Gratitude is Good', *Greater Good Magazine*, 16.11.2010: https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/why_gratitude_is_good

complaining if I didn't stop her. I know listening is great pastoral care, but, at that point, I was just enabling her grumbling. Yes, her life was difficult, but to keep from being consumed by her problems she needed to look up. So I would ask what she was thankful for, and I encouraged her to write down, every day, 5 things for which she could give thanks. That brings us to point 2.

Why be thankful?

Emmons and others have done studies that show the physical, psychological and social benefits of thankfulness. Practising gratitude strengthens the immune system, lowers blood pressure, leads to better sleep, increases optimism and happiness, joy and pleasure, makes you more helpful, generous and compassionate, and helps you feel less lonely and isolated.

But this is not the starting point in the Bible. And, if you think about it, being thankful in order to get those benefits kind of undercuts gratitude, which focuses on the other, rather than the self. So why be thankful according to the Bible? Because everything we have, all the good things in life, are a gift from God. We saw this in our first reading from 1 Chronicles.

The setting is the building of the temple. All the people had donated vast resources for the project. King David himself had also given generously. And now what does David pray?

‘But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand.’⁵

Yes, the people had worked hard. Yes they had given generously from their own personal reserves, as had David. But all of it *came from the hand of God*.

Jesus' brother James writes,

Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.⁶

Every good thing we enjoy; anything we might give to anyone else, is the gift of God. And all God's good gifts are to be received with thanksgiving. This is basic to the Biblical doctrine of Creation, going back to the opening chapters of the Bible. That God made all things means that the entire cosmos is God's gift. From the vast starry night sky to the platypus and the spotted hand fish, whatever we enjoy in creation, was made by God and is a gift we can receive with thanksgiving.

⁵ 1 Chronicles 29:14

⁶ James 1.17

Seeing the world through the lens of Creation, that is as God's gift, brings a triple enjoyment.

First, things are transformed by being a gift. Theologian Miroslav Volf makes the point by considering his pen. You could just see the pen from a functional perspective, an object with which to write. That it is a gold nibbed fountain pen makes it more valuable. But what makes the pen special, why it gives him such pleasure, is the fact that it was given to him by his father. Using the pen reminds him of his father's love for him. The pen is transformed by being a gift. Volf writes,

‘The little trinkets on the shelves of gift shops are not gifts; they *become* gifts when somebody gives them to somebody else. In other words, *gifts are relations*. If the world is a gift, then all things to which we relate are also God's relation to us; that is, each thing in the world is a relationship marked by love.’⁷

To remember that the world is God's gift transforms our experience of it. As we give thanks to God for the world and the particular things that we use or are reminded of, our enjoyment of the world increases because it is a gift from our loving heavenly Father, a token of his affection for us.

But there is a second reason for enjoyment.

Despite the lavish generosity of God, we humans have a habit of blocking-out the Giver. Why? Because – if everything we have is a gift – that says something about us: we're *dependant* (not independent) *and* we owe the Giver at least our gratitude not to mention our worship and obedience.

But the story of humanity is the assertion of independence. We turn in on ourselves and start to believe that all we have is a result of *our* hard-work. We deserve it. It's what we're *entitled to*. By failing to acknowledge and give thanks to God, by rights we forfeit everything. So actually, there's not a single thing we deserve.

But God is more generous still. What we forfeit, He gives back to us by the gift of Himself. He took the cost of our selfishness onto himself on the cross. Now we, the undeserving, can receive once again what we have no earthly right to enjoy.

This changes everything. ***Every breath I take, I don't deserve.*** Each day, I receive my life back again, as from the dead. The new light of the dawn is doubly sweet: “*his mercies are new every morning.*” All that I have, God hasn't just given me once, but twice.

There is one more reason to savour the gifts of God:

⁷ Miroslav Volf, ‘The Giver and the gift: A Christian's delight in things’, *Christian Century*, 6.12.2016: <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/features/giver-and-gift-christians-delight-things>

For those who love God, **every good thing is a promise**, a sign of what is to come. When you savour the sweetness of rain, or the brooding darkness of thunder, or the first lick of an ice cream on a sweltering summer's day, you don't just enjoy the thing itself; you can also enjoy the fact that whatever is coming in the new creation will be brighter, greater, more intense and no longer subject to decay. Like watching a movie trailer, you can enjoy both the present experience and the anticipation of what's to come *at the same time*.

God is preparing a new creation for anyone who would like to join it. The passage of time isn't cause for despair; it's reason for hope. The more time passes, the closer we get to the grand event.

So, Christians can enjoy everything three times: once as a gift we didn't create, once as a privilege we don't deserve and once as a promise we're yet to receive. Seeing everything as gift brings a triple enjoyment.

I say this not actually for your sake, although I do hope you do enjoy God's creation. Rather I say it so that you will love God more. Do you see how it works? The more you savour God's gifts - his creation, offered again to you by grace, as a promise of the new creation, the more the enjoyment of that gift will well up in you a gratitude towards God the Giver, a deep thankfulness to him. Why be thankful? Perhaps especially for our wealth and possessions? Because everything is a gift we didn't create, a privilege we don't deserve and a promise we're yet to receive - all from God.

How to be thankful?

If our hearts naturally bend towards entitlement, how can we cultivate thankfulness? Let me suggest just a few practical ideas to try out.

- Grace at meal times

We all need to eat. Without food we die. One of the easiest ways to work thanksgiving into your day, and to acknowledge your dependence upon God, is to give thanks to God before each meal. You can do that silently, but I would encourage you, every time you are with others, and especially your family, to give thanks to God before you eat. We call this "saying grace", coming from the Latin *gratiarum actio*, which means "act of thanks". Doing it before you eat and waiting till everyone is present also means the meal can be a chance to share life together. Give thanks to God for the food, and for those who made it.

- Noticing God's gifts throughout the day.

As you go through the day, notice whatever good you encounter, and pause to give God thanks. This builds a sense of dependence and increases your joy. It also opens you to see God at work.

- Thanks at the beginning and end of the day.

Similarly, begin and end the day with a prayer of thanks. For example, most mornings when I wake up, as I lie in bed, I pray the Anglican prayer for the morning giving thanks and dedicating the day to God:

Lord our heavenly Father, almighty and everlasting God, thank you for bringing me safely to this day; keep me by your mighty power and grant that I fall into no sin, neither run into any kind of danger, but lead and govern me in all things, that I may always do what is righteous in your sight through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Before you go to sleep, reflect on the day and give thanks to God for each good thing in the day.

- Gratitude Journal

You can buy these in the newsagent. But unlike the secular world, we actually have someone to whom we can give thanks! You can write down the things you've noticed at the end of each day. The great thing about journals is that you can look back and see how God has answered prayer and how you've seen him at work. You can do a weekly, monthly and yearly reflection, and you can give thanks through those 3 lenses - a gift I didn't create, a privilege I don't deserve, a promise I look forward to.

- Write a letter to someone who has touched your life or a psalm to God

This is a way to slow down and take time to give thanks. So often we have no idea the impact we have in the lives of others. What a tremendous encouragement to hear how you have blessed someone!

- Finally, if you are prone to complaining or noticing what others have that you don't, here's my suggestion. When you're about to complain, take that as a prompt to pause and instead think of something that you can give thanks for.

Paul urges us to give thanks in all circumstances. All that we have is the gracious gift of our loving Father. It's a privilege we don't deserve and a promise of what is to come. Let's be people who cultivate the habit of giving thanks.