

4. Generosity

Date: 19 February 2023, 7th Sunday after Epiphany

Location: St George's Battery Point

Series: Generous - The Bible on Wealth

Texts: Deuteronomy 14:22-29; 1 Timothy 6:17-19; Luke 19:1-10

Introduction:

One of the astonishing facts of history is that after starting with a handful of Jewish peasants, within a few hundred years, Christians had taken over the Roman empire. How? Humanly speaking, what was their power? Here's a letter written in the 2nd century by a Christian Mathetes to his friend Diognetus to explain what he thought was the answer to that question:

For the Christians are distinguished from other people neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe. ... inhabiting Greek as well as barbarian cities, ... and following the customs of the natives in respect to clothing, food, and the rest of their ordinary conduct, they display to us their wonderful and confessedly striking method of life. They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. They marry, as do all [others]; they beget children; but they do not destroy their offspring. They have a common table, but not a common bed. They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives. They love all men, and are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned; they are put to death, and restored to life. They are poor, yet make many rich; they are in lack of all things, and yet abound in all; they are dishonoured, and yet in their very dishonour are glorified. They are evil spoken of, and yet are justified; they are reviled, and bless; they are insulted, and repay the insult with honour; they do good, yet are punished as evil-doers.¹

How did it happen that the Roman empire turned Christian? The fact is, nobody could match the beauty of their lives; their lifestyle was gorgeous: A lack of racism, so that they didn't regard themselves as superior to Greek or barbarian; A high regard for human life amidst a culture of death. They refused to abandon children, especially girls which was common in

¹ *Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetes*, 6 (Translated by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. From *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1. Edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885.)

the day; A radical sex ethic - they have a common table but not a common bed. In other words, they understood sex not to be an appetite to be fed, but the gift of God by which we say to another person in the most powerful way possible, I belong completely and exclusively and permanently to you; and fourth, and a radical generosity in spirit and in deed, “they are poor yet make many rich.”.

This is the fourth in our series Generous: the Bible on Wealth. How we approach wealth is integral to the radically distinct and yet beautiful life that God calls us to as Christians. The conversion of our wallets is perhaps the final conversion in our lives. It’s where we can see the radical transformation Jesus brings through the power of the Holy Spirit. Zacchaeus is the great example - he went from grasping greed to outrageous generosity. Giving away half his possessions and paying back those he had cheated four times as much.

Our key text for today is 1 Timothy 6. We’ll look at 3 points - Rich enjoyment, Rich in good deeds, a Rich life.

1. Rich enjoyment

Paul is speaking to Timothy and telling him how to pastorally care for those who are well off. Listen again to what he says:

Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. 18 Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. 19 In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.

Paul names 2 spiritual dangers of wealth. First, **pride**. Wealth can make us think we’re better than those lazy poor people. Conversely, we can see rich people as lesser than us - greedy, money grabbing, tax cheats. At the same time we envy and resent them. You know you are getting somewhere on this issue when you see poor and rich just as people, because you see yourself as just a person under the grace of God. So you are able to love them independently of their financial status.

Second, the rich are not to set their **hopes** on wealth, which is uncertain, but to put their hope in God. Wealth can insulate us from suffering and fool us into thinking it secures our future. But the pandemic has both shown what was already many people’s experience, just how uncertain wealth is. And wealth cannot secure us against death. We set our hopes on

God. He is stable, steadfast, eternal, secure, through all the chances and changes of this world.

Once we guard against wealth as a source of pride or hope, we can then receive wealth for what it is - the good gift of God. He *richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment*. Do hear this fundamentally positive approach to wealth. It's OK for you to work hard and do well. It's OK for you to own a house and clothes and to go on holidays and so on. All these things are OK. There is no command not to enjoy the fruit of your labour. There is no middle class cringe here. We can enjoy the good things God gives us.

This is the starting point for a Biblical understanding of generosity. But it is not the ending point. In verse 18, the apostle invites us to aim to be rich in what is actually important, not money, but in good deeds. Have a read with me.

2. Rich in good deeds

Command [those who are rich in this present world] to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share.

This is God's word to us. We are to do good, be rich in good works, generous and ready to share. This is in fact the great opportunity of wealth - to use it for the good of others. How do I use the wealth God has entrusted to me to love my neighbour? There is a self-abandonment here, a lovely other person focus that makes little sense unless you know the grace of God, who gave up everything for us, and so it makes sense for us to give up everything for others. It seems to me that this is a good test to see whether you've really got this. To the person who does not know God's lavish grace, who doesn't trust God's abundant provision, if they knew your financial generosity would they say it was reckless, irresponsible? If they said it was sensible, then I wonder whether you've really grasped the uncertainty of riches, and opportunity to bless others.

So how can I be rich in good deeds, generous and willing to share? There are all sorts of ways you can be generous. With your time, your expertise, hospitality, service and so on. But today, we're focusing on your money. The Bible outlines 3 basic destinations for your generosity - the poor, the mission of your church and the mission of the gospel further afield.

We see the first 2 outlined clearly in that text from Israel's life in Deuteronomy 14. Israel was commanded to give a tithe - 10%, of their produce. What did this go to? Verse 29 tells us: To the Levites, the foreigners, the fatherless and widows. The tithe provided for the material

needs of the Levites, because they didn't have land of their own to work, but instead worked in the temple. Second, it provided for those on the margins of society who didn't have land or couldn't work the land - the foreigner, think refugee, orphans and widows. There were other laws, like the law which said the poor must be able to glean in the fields,² which were aimed at creating a generous society where those on the margins were cared for. We looked a bit at this 2 years ago in our Justice sermon series.

How might this text apply today? Earlier in 1 Timothy Paul gives instructions for caring for widows, and also that the elders who lead the church deserve their wages.³ What you give to church goes directly to paying for the work that Amy and I do. In the past, the church was *the* social welfare provider in society. That is not the case now, although interestingly Anglicare is the largest social welfare provider in Tasmania. So on the basis of this text, we as Christians are to give to the mission of the church and serving the poor. Notice that under Old Testament law that 10%, or tithe, was mandated. There were numerous other opportunities in Jewish life for further free will offerings to God and to the needy.

1 Timothy also outlines what you might call the principle of proximity. Paul sees the first call on our generosity to be our immediate families, so that if children and grandchildren don't provide for their ageing relatives, they are worse than unbelievers!⁴ Similarly, your primary mission responsibility is the mission of your church, and so to invest heavily in that makes good sense.

That third category of the mission of the gospel, and we find numerous references in the New Testament to churches supporting apostle's like Paul taking the gospel to new territories. Paul calls this "partnership in the gospel" and he says that the financial gifts of the Philippian Christians are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God.⁵ Do hear that won't you. Giving to God's work is something that pleases God. Here I acknowledge that many of you give generously and sacrificially.

What might giving to the 3 priorities of the mission of the church, at home and abroad, and to care for the poor, look like concretely? You can do the first 2 by giving to St George's. Your gifts go to paying our bills and to supporting the Durdin's serving in Cambodia. We periodically offer opportunities to give to Anglicare. You may also have personal causes you support. How are you planning your generosity according to the priorities of the Kingdom of

² Leviticus 19.9, 23.22

³ 1 Timothy 5.3-18

⁴ 1 Timothy 5.8

⁵ Philippians 1.5, 4.14-19

God? Now, I say this next bit with great hesitation, because Jesus tells us not to practise our acts of righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. But as a concrete example, he's what we do. We give 10% of my fortnightly gross pay to St George's. We also sponsor a child through Compassion. We give an annual gift to Nungalinga College, which trains Aboriginal Christian leaders. And we then give occasionally as other needs come up.

I've been adapting these sermons from a series a friend gave at his church. At this point he has a whole section on keeping a budget. We are not great at that, but it can be very helpful. This will mean you pay your bills, buy your essentials, plan your generosity, both regular and spontaneous, and have some discretionary spending for going out and that sort of thing.

I've spoken about regular giving, but the most substantial generosity from people now is not from their income, but their assets, as they decide they have accumulated enough and so start creating trust funds and so on, not for themselves or their family, but for good works into the years and decades ahead. This is the phenomenal opportunity that wealth gives. What a thrill to consider what a difference you can make in the world with your wealth! Imagine establishing a charity as a life goal. What a way to make generosity, not an afterthought, but the centre of your life! For those of you planning for the end of life, you have a great opportunity to invest in the future of God's kingdom in bequests.

Deliberate, sacrificial generosity is the invitation of God. But generosity is not something that grows naturally. It requires serious spiritual energy. You need to actively exercise your generosity muscle to be strong in this. You need to trust God that he will provide for you; that his priorities are what counts; and not those of the world around you. You need to stop complaining or comparing yourself to others, and thank God for giving you what he has given you. You need to plan and then activate generosity – making sure that money actually leaves your bank account and gets into the accounts of mission agencies, welfare organisations, church, and individuals.

3. A Rich life

This leads to the final principle, that of the reward for generosity. This is a word that we generally find distasteful, but it is repeatedly there in the Scriptures. Did you see it in 1 Tim 6.19? Your generosity is in fact a storing up for yourself of something, namely, *treasure as a firm foundation for the future, so that you may take hold of the life that truly is life*. When you give your money away, you don't give it away, you just invest it for eternity.

The story goes that a rich man goes to heaven, St. Peter walks him to his heavenly house. He passes a huge mansion (his gardener's). He walks on a little farther to another huge mansion (the guy who lived down the road in a very modest semi). He walks around a corner to see a tiny shack, no more than a few boards nailed together.

"Why did my gardener and the guy down the road get mansions and I got this shack? St. Peter replied, "We did the best we could with what you sent us."

Now that's more wrong than right, but it's not because there is a correlation between what the person did with their money and their experience of the life to come. It's because that correlation is to do with how much he sent, rather than the generosity and sacrifice of what he sent. For the truth is that what you give away in good deeds, generosity and sharing, you don't give away. You store up for yourself as treasure in heaven. And we're told this precisely as a motive for even greater generosity. The question is, do you believe that God sees and remembers?

Conclusion: the dreaded question

Of course, there is one final, dreaded question - how much? How much should I give away? How generous should I be? There's a simple answer. 10% is what you should give, at least if you are an Old Testament Jewish person. If you're not, and I don't think that's many of us, actually there is no simple answer at all. What there is, is a heart answer. When Paul is engaging in some straight talk with the Corinthians on this issue, he says this:

9 For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.

In other words, we follow not a 10% principle, but one that will invite us to a far more radical generosity. We follow a gospel principle, because we follow in the footsteps of Jesus. He had all the riches of heaven, yet he stepped down into the rags of our spiritual poverty. Bearing my sin and your sin he poured out his very life for us, so that by his poverty we might become unspeakably rich, the beneficiaries of every spiritual blessing God has to give. That's our model, our principle, for generosity.

God calls us to a generosity that mirrors his generosity in Christ. I suspect 10% is just the starting point. We are so much more blessed than those Old Testament saints. And as you face into this, you might say, "wow, that's tough! I've got obligations, I've got debts, I'm going to struggle to adjust." But friends, the one thing you won't say is, 'It's mine. That's

unreasonable for you to ask that of me.' No, he has given us his all. And we are granted the opportunity to be those who

do good, [are] rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a firm foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that truly is life.