

Money: As Servant

Series: Money
Date: 11 Feb. 2024, 6th Sunday after Epiphany
Location: St George's Battery Point
Texts: 2 Corinthians 8:1-15, 9:6-11; Mark 12:41-44

Come with me if you will to a young church in a town far from here. They're a mixed bunch this church, old and young, women, men, children. There's a prison guard and one girl used to be a psychic. They live in a country where there is no social welfare system. Extended families look after each other. And all look to the great men and women as patrons - people from whom you may find help in your time of need, but who as likely as not will only spread their charity around so as to be seen and honoured by all.

Christianity has only recently come to this country and it's seen as pretty odd. And so this church has found itself on the margins of society, far from the power and wealth that drive community life. In fact, they'd often found themselves on the receiving end of some pretty serious persecution. The guys who planted the church had been beaten up and thrown in prison.

Recently though, they heard from a visiting preacher about a church in another country that had been struck by famine. Even though they had never met them, such was their sense of solidarity and unity with their sisters and brothers in Christ that on hearing of their great need, and despite their own poverty, they got together an incredibly generous gift to send to this distant church. For them it was a great privilege to share what little they had to meet the needs of others in the faith.

This is the second of our mini series Money: Master or Servant.

Money fundamentally is a good gift of God, it belongs to him, and we're called to be stewards, serving others with the gifts he has given us. Last week we saw the dark side of money. The temptation to love money more than God and in so doing it becomes our master and we its servants, and that spills out into all kinds of evil in our lives and the world around us.

This week we're looking at how we can be freed from the love of money such that it becomes for us what it was made for, namely a good servant. We'll see that Jesus makes all the difference to how we look at money, wealth and possessions and what we do with them. We'll do this by way of eavesdropping on a conversation - between the apostle Paul and the church in Corinth. Sometimes the most interesting conversations are the ones you overhear!

As you may have guessed, the church I introduced us to was the Macedonian church (northern Greece today) that we meet in the beginning of 2 Corinthians chapter 8. The situation was this. There was a famine in Palestine and Paul on his journeys around Greece and Turkey, as well as planting churches, preaching and teaching, also asked the churches to send financial aid to the starving church in Jerusalem. The Macedonian churches had given generously and now Paul is asking the Corinthian church to follow their example. As we listen in on his exhortation we find a whole theology of money in action.

The first thing to notice here is that Paul says the Macedonian churches' generosity is a grace or a gift given by God.

8:1 *And now, sisters and brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.*

We see this again in verse 7:

But since you excel in everything - in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love that we have kindled in you - see also that you excel in this grace of giving.

The Corinthian church was well known for its emphasis on the gifts of the Spirit - Paul here says - "Well, you excel in the other gifts - why not excel in this one too?!" For Paul, generosity is part of what Christian maturity looks like.

There's kind of a paradox here. Being generous is a gift from God. That's what grace is - a gift. And yet generosity is also something that you can do, something that Paul can ask for.

We get a clue in verse 9. Paul summarises the gospel, the good news about Jesus, in economic terms. *For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.*

By rights we are spiritual paupers, with not a cent to our name. Christ, on the other hand, owns all the riches of heaven and earth. Yet, for our sake he gave up those riches, and entered in our poverty - even to the point of losing everything on the cross, so that we might share in his riches.

This is the incredible, unlooked for, undeserved generosity of God. And Paul's point is that the more a person understands just how generous God has been to them, the more generous they will be with what God has given them - not least with your money.

The Macedonians are a case in point - being on the receiving end of God's abundant generosity produced in them an overflowing joy, so that, even in their extreme poverty, they pleaded with Paul for the privilege of sharing what they had received with others in need. Paul was astonished. This went far beyond his expectations.

While the Macedonians gave beyond their means, Paul does expect that we be generous according to our **means**. Verse 11-12:

*Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, **according to your means**. 12 For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have.*

The goal, Paul writes, is that there might be equality, verse 13:

Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality.

The principle is that the abundance one has is the source of provision for the needs of another. Verse 14:

At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need.

This sounds like an incredibly risky, or at the very least imprudent, approach to money. Isn't the time of abundance time for saving against a rainy day?

This isn't the time to go into issues of saving and debt, upon which our whole financial system depends.

But I do want to say this: There is a very strong pull for us to look to finances and wealth to secure our future - as individuals, as families, as organisations, as a church. There is good wisdom to this. But it is

only, what you might call, a secondary wisdom. And it can become the controlling factor for our decision making, not least what we do with our money. Remember Money can become for us an idol - something we trust for our security. Jesus says, *where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.* (Luke 12.34) No, the primary reality is that God is the one who provides for us. God knows what we need. He is our only security against the future.

What does Paul say, 9:8?

And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.

God is the one who provides. And he provides abundantly so that we might share of that abundance.

10 Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. 11 You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.

The equation is this: **God's generous provision** leads to **our generous giving** which results in **thanksgiving and praise to God** for his provision.

God's Word here tells us our generosity does 3 things:

First, it provides for the needs of others. This is a no brainer. There is so much need out there in our world. Yes there are aid agencies and governments that do great work in meeting the needs of others. But generosity starts with you and me.

Second, Generosity secures for us riches in heaven. The converse is also true, *whoever sows sparingly, will also reap sparingly.*¹

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 apartment). 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. Jesus saw the woman give her two copper coins. The question is, do you believe that God sees and remembers?

And number 3, Generosity brings praise and thanksgiving to God from those whose needs God supplies through us. We know this. The greater need met, the greater the thanksgiving. What a privilege to be the catalyst for others praising God!

¹ 2 Corinthians 9:6

We've seen the invitation to be generous and willing to share. We're focussing on money today, so how can we be generous with the money God has entrusted to us? 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.

How might this text apply today? In 1 Timothy Paul gives instructions for caring for widows, and also that the elders who lead the church deserve their wages.² 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. But 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!³ 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.⁴ I know many of you give generously and sacrificially. Do hear what Paul is saying won't you? Your giving to God's work is something that pleases God.

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 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 occasionally as other needs come up.

² 1 Timothy 5.3-18

³ 1 Timothy 5.8

⁴ Philippians 1.5, 4.14-19

Deliberate, sacrificial generosity is the invitation of God. But generosity is not something that grows naturally. It's a spiritual discipline. It teaches us to hold lightly to the things of this world and seek our treasure with God. 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 plan and then activate generosity – making sure that money actually leaves your bank account and gets into the accounts of mission agencies, welfare organisations, the church, and individuals.

There's one final dreaded question. How much should I give? 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. Hear again St Paul's words:

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.

We follow not a 10% principle, we follow a gospel principle. One that invites us to a far more radical generosity, 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're faced with 2 questions today: do we really trust that God will abundantly supply all that we need? And how can we exercise that generosity muscle with the gifts God has given us? In meeting the needs of the poor, the church and the mission of God.