

## How do I give? (Matthew 6:6-15 & 2 Corinthians 9:6-15)

From a talk given by Steve Midgley on 16<sup>th</sup> October 2011

One of our concerns here at Christ Church is that we don't give the impression we are always after your money. That's why we don't pass a collection plate round at our services. And it's why we generally only speak about our finances two or at the most three times during the course of a year. Put simply, we want anyone taking a look at the Christian faith to understand that at its heart Christianity is about God giving to us, not us giving to God.

Yet sometimes I wonder how wise this really is. For when we do get round to talking about money, as we are today, it almost seems like an unfortunate diversion. As if week by week we work at the really serious stuff: faith, salvation, growth in Christ and then, because you cannot run a church on thin air, we are finally forced to step aside and talk practicalities.

Only that's not how it is at all. At least not if we take Jesus seriously. Money wasn't an occasional topic for Jesus. It was on his big five, actually his big three; possibly even his number one. He was constantly talking money, constantly making clear that what you did with your wealth mattered in the spiritual realm. So it must be good for us to talk money today. Possibly far more vital than we realise.

But let me be clear that, if you are here as a visitor, we really *aren't* after your money. If you are just listening in on things, finding out about the Christian faith, I hope what you hear will be of interest, but I'm not speaking with you primarily in mind.

We're going to start by thinking about money in general from Jesus teaching in Matthew 6 and then move to think more specifically about giving from 2 Corinthians 9.

### 1. It's a subject we must not avoid

One sermon I heard put it like this: Significant spiritual growth simply is not possible, unless you put your money *and your attitude to your money* into God's hands. It's just too big an issue to do otherwise. That is the clear implication of verse 19: ***'Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal'***. According to Jesus, if God hasn't got control of your money he hasn't got control of you at all. Jesus is as blunt as that. To call ourselves followers of Jesus Christ, when that following has not reached our bank accounts, calls into question whether we are really following him at all.

Look at verse 24 ***'No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money'***. If Jesus hasn't got your wallet; he hasn't got your heart. But how can I know whether my attitude to money is right. How can I be sure it isn't my master?

Well one clear way is to find out is to ask if you can give it away. Do you have control over it so that you can do with it as you want; or does it have control over you so that you can't. In the OT the financial rule of thumb was the tithe, 10% of all that a person gathered in a harvest was given to God. The point wasn't that God deserved a little share but that God deserved the lot. As King David puts it in 1 Chronicles 29 ***'Yours O lord is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is yours. All things come from you and of your own have we given you.'***

Let me adapt an illustration from Tim Keller to make the point. Imagine two scenarios. Imagine a parent gives a child a nice big bar of chocolate. And then a moment later the parent says 'actually can I have a square?' And, with utter defiance in their eyes, the child says: 'No. It's mine'. The parent, wonderfully calm under pressure as we parents always are, says: 'I know it's yours, I gave it to you, but now I'd like you to give me one square.' 'No, it's **all** mine', comes the reply. 'You gave it to **me**.' Hard to imagine? I'm guess not.

Imagine another scenario.

Imagine that out of the blue a rich uncle buys you a holiday home in Lanzarote. It is to be your sole possession. The only condition is that he asks to use it for the month of August. What will you say? 'What? August? Be serious. That's the best month. No way.'

Of course you don't. You say: 'Fine. If you're going to give me a holiday home in Lanzarote and all that you ask is that I let you use it in August. Of course I'll agree. That is brilliant. Thank you!'

So with God, which are we? The child with the chocolate bar? Or the grown up with the house? So amazed at God's generosity that giving to him is obvious and easy or so wedded to our belongings that all our giving is a struggle? We're so often the child with the chocolate bar aren't we? 'What?' 'Ten percent of my income.' 'Ten percent? No! It's mine. *All* mine.'

Only it's His. All His. At least if we believe what we say we believe. That he gave me this body so I could do my job; that he gave me my mind so that I could study, be educated, and employed; that he gives me the very air I breathe in order to sustain my life. It's all his. And yet we say: 'No you can't have 10%'?

Let me make a brief aside. Just in case it is not clear, this is not a pitch for Christ Church to have 10%. It's a challenge to all of us that we should honour God with our money. A challenge to show that we are not ruled by our possessions by giving some of it away; by giving God his tithe. So let's turn on to 2 Corinthians 9 and see a bit more about the attitude we must develop to our giving.

## **2. An attitude we must develop**

In verse 7 Paul writes that ***each one must give as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.***

There is quite a story here. Paul was raising money for famine relief and believers in wealthy Corinth had promised to contribute to those who were starving in Jerusalem. However Paul is worried they may not come good on their promise. He fears an embarrassing scene when he arrives and finds them not ready and scabbling together whatever they can find – coins down the side of the sofa or whatever. And it will be so much worse if Paul arrives with believers from Macedonia. For even though they are really poor, Paul says that they have already given.

***'We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, 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. For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints.'* (2 Corinthians 8:1-4)**

It will be desperately awkward if these believers turn up in Corinth and see great wealth yet find these believers haven't planned to give a thing. Yet despite the urgency, Paul still doesn't issue commands:

***'The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.'* (2 Corinthians 9: 6-7)**

In case it isn't clear, the reason we're waiting three weeks before we ask for responses is so that we can all give, having made up our own mind, ***not reluctantly or under compulsion for God loves a cheerful giver***. This next three weeks is not to enable you to screw up your courage. As if giving was something like preparing to go to the dentist – and we reckon it'll take 3 weeks to talk ourselves into it. 'OK – if I must, I'll go ahead'.

The three weeks is to allow regulars to do business with God, to talk to him, to remember his goodness, to remember his promises so that on November 6<sup>th</sup> we can give eagerly, freely, joyfully. If you can't do that – please don't give. It will be spiritually damaging to do so: damaging for you and damaging for the rest of us.

But how do we do it? How do we get to be more like the Macedonians, who gave generously and less like the Corinthians, who didn't?

One element we've seen already. We remember God in creation. We remember that all things come from him. Which means all that I have is a generous gift from him. My car, my clothes, my flat screen TV are not actually the result of my hard work but the result of his generous grace. But we also need to remember who God is in salvation.

Let me get back to the tithe. I suspect there may be two reactions to the idea of a tithe of 10%. Some may be thinking that it is just too much; that 'I can't possibly give away 10% of my income'. And yet if tomorrow we lost our job and the next day got a new job that paid 10% less, we'd cope. Somehow we'd find a way and we'd get by. We'd tighten our belt and tough it out and find a way to make it happen. Which means it's not that we *can't* give 10%, it's that we don't *want* to or don't believe we need to. And in sense that's right we *don't* need to. You won't find a place in the New Testament where Jesus or the apostles insist on a 10% tithe.

Only look at it like this. If the blessings that the people of God received under the Old covenant merited 10%, is it really conceivable that we should give less? As if God having done more, we might now do less? In the OT God gave his people a land, a temple and a king, but now he has given us eternal glory, the gift of his own Spirit and the life of his own Son. When he has done all that does it really seem possible that we would now throttle back on our giving? Let me clear about two things. First the tithe isn't law; at best it is a good rule of thumb. We aren't legalists and 10% is not compulsory; so if you want to give more than 10% you must feel free to do so!

Second, less tongue in cheek, let me be clear again that I'm not arguing for a tithe to Christ Church. I am arguing for a tithe to God. If you consider Christ church your home church then I think there are good reasons to give Christ Church the major component of your giving, but you may choose to direct giving elsewhere as well. The point of these next three weeks is for us to go to God, to remember his rich blessings and respond as cheerful givers.

It is finally about us and God. There is a lovely story about the American evangelist Billy Graham who was in a church when the collection plate came round. And he fished a note out of his wallet and put it in. But as he put it in he suddenly realised it was a \$20 dollar bill, instead of the \$10 bill he'd intended. So he quickly reached over and tried to grab it back. His wife was next to him 'what are you doing, Billy?' she whispered. He explained how he'd meant to put in a \$10 but ended up putting a \$20 bill by mistake. 'Don't you worry', said his wife Ruth, 'God knows what you meant to give'.

### 3. A blessing we will receive

We've seen that money is a subject we must not avoid; and that the attitude we must develop is of cheerful giving; now finally **the blessing we will receive**. All around these instructions about giving in 2 Corinthians 9 are reminders of how things work spiritually.

Verse 6: ***The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.***

Verse 10: ***'He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness.'***

Verse 11: ***'You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God.'***

Back to verse 8: ***'And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work.'***

That is really strong isn't it! **All** grace; **all** sufficiency; **all** things; at **all** times; doing **every** good work.

God is no man's debtor and you certainly cannot out give him. Yet what does this actually mean? Is it some sort of divine cash back? I give a £100 and I get £200 back; I give £1000 a cheque for £2000 arrives on the doorstep? Is that the idea?

No. It's much better than that. Because it's not financial reward I am promised but spiritual reward. Giving changes *me* because giving is an act of faith. When I give I say: I trust God; I believe his kingdom is eternal; I believe heaven is where my treasure is best placed. I believe he has given his Son for me; and I believe that his inexpressible gift, as verse 15 puts it, defines the way things work in the spiritual realm. The more I give the more I am blessed; the more I lose life the more I save it. The Macedonians gave according to their means, and beyond their means. It must mean sacrifice; it must mean an impact on my lifestyle. Whatever else Christian giving is, it can't be less than that.

A funny thing happens when we give sacrificially. We discover that what's left is so much more enjoyable. I remember that it's his gift and I receive it with joy. When I hold tight what I have never seems enough; I worry about losing it; I begrudge lending it; and I feel guilty about each and every purchase I make. That's what it's like when me, God and my money are out of synch.

The thing is that when we have our fist curled tight around our possessions there is no space for God to give us His blessing. We have to open up our hand and stop clinging to what we have that is the time that we will find just how much God has to give us.

Let me end with a footnote. If all that I have been saying sounds like madness to you. If the idea of giving away 10% of your income sounds raving, it probably means you haven't yet got grace. You haven't grasped verse 15. You don't know, really know, the scale of his inexpressible gift. So start there. Begin with Jesus. Come to Christianity Explored.

But if you have got that, if you know what he's done for you, you may be saying: I don't know **how** I can do it; I don't know **how** I'm going to manage to push my giving up toward 10%; but it will no longer seem mad to you. It won't seem unreasonable. Not when you know what he's done. And somehow you will find a way to get your giving moving in the right direction.

It *will* be an act of faith; and it *will* lead to spiritual blessing.