

Grace of Giving

Norman Cameron, minister of High Kirk, Ballymena, discusses the tricky subject of money and presents a compelling argument for adopting a lavish generosity that reflects the grace and love of Christ.

The Bible is a very down-to-earth and practical book. Someone has calculated that there are 2300 verses in the Bible on money, wealth and possessions and about one third of Jesus' parables relate to these topics. Yet it is quite rare to hear sermons on such subjects for a variety of reasons.

For many years Presbyterian ministers were reluctant to preach on the subject because there was a system in place which strongly linked the minister's stipend to a percentage of the offering. That is no longer the case. Another reason why ministers may have been reluctant to preach on it, perhaps, is out of fear. Money is seen as a very personal and sensitive issue and we feel it is better to avoid the subject, especially in a recession. The trouble is that the Bible mentions it often and if we are to be faithful to preaching the whole of the Bible we must inevitably hear teaching on the issue.

The General Assembly passed resolutions this year requesting "ministers to preach and teach regularly about the importance of Christian generosity as a percentage of what is received. The General Assembly also, while bearing in mind that circumstances vary widely, encourage Presbyterians, in the exercise of their joyful freedom and responsibilities, to consider setting aside in the region of at least 10% of their income (after tax) as a target for their Christian generosity."

Our giving is a core part of how we live as disciples of Jesus Christ. It is a measure of our devotion to the Lord. Billy Graham once said, "give me five minutes with a person's cheque book and I will show you their priorities".

We worship a generous God

In 2 Corinthians 8 Paul commends the Macedonian churches for their generosity but he puts it in the context of a response to the outworking of the grace of God. Verse one says, "we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches." Their generosity was as a response to the grace of God working in their lives. Another word for grace is generosity. So behind the generosity of the Macedonian church Paul saw the generosity of God. The better understanding we have of God and his generosity to us, the more generous we will be to others.

When Jesus walked among us he showed us how generous God's heart is. His first miracle was the turning of water into wine in John 2 and there we see that He gave copious amounts. Six large water jars were filled each holding 20-30 gallons and it not only was a large quantity of wine but it was quality wine, for the chief steward of the wedding said the best was saved until last. Jesus did not have to do that but he did.

We worship a generous God, a gracious God, a giving God and of course we see this most especially in Christ's self-giving sacrifice on the cross. He was rich, the Son of God dwelling in heaven – but He became poor. He took human form, divested Himself of His glory, stepped down, dying to take the punishment for our sins so that in His poverty we can become spiritually rich.

When we realise we worship a generous God, it connects with our souls and impacts us to want to respond in a variety of ways. We will want to be extravagant in our praise, in our offerings, in our service, in our time. As Zacchaeus was touched by Jesus his response was one of extravagance and he gave away half to the poor and four times what he had stolen. As the hymn When I Survey declares, "Love so amazing, so divine, demands, my soul, my life, my all".

Giving to God is a response of practical thanksgiving

As we look at both Old and New Testaments we see that God expects us to bring offerings to Him and to others as part of worship. He expects us to respond to His grace in practical ways.

God does not actually need anything for Himself. He is not dependent on us and He does not need our money. Everything is His anyway – He has made it. Acts 17:25 says, “God is not served by human hands as though He needed anything, for He himself gives to all men life and breath and everything.” God commands our offerings to be done because it shows that we honour Him. He requires them as an act of thanksgiving because it shows our love for Him.

God usually carries out His kingdom purposes through people, so that is why we need to do more than sing and pray. That is why our offerings need to be tangible because ministry teams need paid, church buildings need built, missionaries need to be released and supported, the hungry need fed. The work of spreading the kingdom on earth requires earthly resources, which is why it is to be an act of practical thanksgiving.

How are we to give?

The Bible tells us we are to give regularly. 1 Corinthians 16:2 says, “On the first day of every week each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income.” We like to be paid regularly so we should give to God’s work regularly. Note that Paul says, “in keeping with his income”, therefore our giving should be proportionate to what we receive.

We are also called to give cheerfully. There should be an attitude of voluntarily and willingly giving to God’s work in response to his grace to us. Jesus was specific about secrecy in giving, saying in Matthew 6:2,4 “When you give to the needy do not announce it with trumpets; do not let your right hand know what your left hand is doing so that your giving may be in secret”.

In 2 Corinthians 8:2-3 we are also challenged about the sacrificial nature of giving. Paul says, “Out of the most severe trial and extreme poverty they welled up in rich generosity... I testify they gave as much as they were able and even beyond their ability.” The base line is that we give proportionately, yes, but there will be times when we also give sacrificially. That may be because we see a particular need over and above the regular need. We see a famine crisis, or there is a special mission or building project and we dig a little deeper. This is what the Macedonians did even though they were not a wealthy church. They excelled themselves in the grace of giving.

Tithing, or giving 10%, was a working guideline for the people of the Old Testament as they brought the first-fruits of their crops to the temple, and to the Levites, the priestly tribe who had no land on which they could grow crops. Later, in the New Testament, there was an expectation from Jesus that the Pharisees would still tithe (Matthew 23:23).

It is important that we get real on this and don’t play at it as sadly many of us Presbyterians do. The whole issue of money is a heart issue, which is why Jesus spoke about it so often. Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. You cannot serve God and money. It does not get much blunter than that.

When we give generously we are saying, “Lord I really believe in you and I believe in your kingdom.” Sometimes people will give like it is paying an insurance premium - just enough to keep them on the church books, hedging their bets, “If God is not there well I did not waste too much of my money and if He is there He hopefully will look kindly on that insurance premium I paid each week!”

We can never out-give God and we can never put Him in our debt. But let’s enter into the grace of giving, He is a generous God. Let’s give regularly and proportionately and secretly and cheerfully and sacrificially and then who knows if He will say to us as He said through Malachi to his people long ago, “Test me in this and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it.” Malachi 3:11