



Sermon notes

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Story:

There was a famous strong man who performed in theatres and circuses around the country. Audiences were amazed by his feats of strength but, at the end of each show, he gave the opportunity to anyone in the audience to compete with him on a single and simple proof of strength. He would take an orange and squeeze it with one hand until he had squeezed all the juice he could out of it into a glass. He would then invite anyone to try and squeeze another drop out of it. People were often up for the challenge: big, young men would try but, at every place, no one ever squeezed out another drop from those oranges.

One time late in his career, he set the challenge: having squeezed with all his strength, he put out the invitation. To his and the rest of audience's surprise, a petite and elderly lady made her way through the auditorium and on to the stage. There were titters of amusement as she stood before them and took the mangled orange in her hand. Then she squeezed and, to everyone's amazement, drops of juice clearly dropped into the glass beneath it. The strong man stood amazed, aghast and embarrassed.

'How on earth did you do that?' he asked. 'Simple,' the lady replied, 'I've been a church treasurer for years.'

I imagine any former church treasurers here will have more than a little sympathy with the lady in the story.

Why is it that, in most churches, money is such a problem for us? You get the feeling that even when ministers want to talk about money, they never quite say what they mean.

When a fellow says, 'It ain't the money but the principle of the thing,' – it's the money!

Frank Hubbard

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I want today for us to think specifically about Christian giving. You might ask the question, 'Is it right to talk about money without talking about stewardship in general?' My answer to the question would be that no one who teaches about spiritual gifts feels the need to always mention money, so why can't we mention money without reference to time and to gifts?

The truth of it is, the last part of us to be converted is our pocket. As Voltaire said,

Voltaire: *When it is a question of money, everybody is of the same religion.*

I want to teach about Christian giving with reference to the Bible's clear teaching on it. And finally, I better issue a health warning: I will challenge you to give faithfully and generously.

Jesus taught directly about the power of money. In our culture, we tend to think of money as a neutral medium of exchange, whereas Jesus called it Mammon – a kind of god that can hold power over us. In fact, Jesus' only remedy for us to break the power of Mammon is for us to learn to give generously.

When people say, 'It's not the money, it's what you do with it,' they are not reflecting the teaching of Jesus. Jesus taught, by implication, that it's easy to end up with your money owning you rather than you owning your money.

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There are many misconceptions about Christian giving, so it's important we agree some basic assumptions we have about it.

- **Christian giving is a primary Christian responsibility**
2 Cor 8:7 'But since you excel in everything – in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love we have kindled in you – see that you also *excel in this grace of giving.*'
- **The giving of my time is also an important but distinct Christian responsibility**
We are called to serve and give our time. Although of equal importance, giving of our time is different and additional to giving our money.
- **The guiding principle of sacrificial giving**
Luke 21:1-4 The Widow's offering: 'she in her poverty put in all she had to live on'. This is a reflection of the Jesus' sacrificial gift of his life and what he asks of us as his followers.
- **Sacrificial giving will unlock things in me spiritually that nothing else will unlock.**
Malachi 3:10. God tells His people that if they bring their full gift to Him, He will 'throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it.'

A misprint in a church magazine misquoted a verse from 2 Corinthians. It read, 'The Lord loves a cheerful giver.' The challenge to give cheerfully is a challenge for most of us, not least in these times of standing orders and direct debits and all that stuff.

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RT Kendall expands this last truth in his book, *The Gift of Giving*:

'In other words, tithing does something for you spiritually. You will only ask, "why did I not start tithing sooner?" It does something for you that cannot be explained in terms of material return. It sets you on a course to be more than you have been – more of what God wants you to be.'

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In the Bible, **the call to sacrificial giving is made on two fundamental foundations** – God's two great acts in our world:

1. **God's creation**
2. **God's redemption**

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1. GOD'S CREATION

- **The creation as a generous gift.**

Genesis 1

God creates vegetation, fish in the sea, birds in the sky and animals on the ground. He makes them bear fruit and multiply and He affirms their value ('He saw that they were good').

He then commands his human creation to steward the rest of creation – it is given/entrusted to them to rule over, make use of and enjoy.

- **Tithing as a response to God's generous gift**

Cain & Abel (Genesis 4): both brothers, seemingly without prompting, bring offerings to God. Their offering is an instinctive response to God's generous gift of creation – the fruits of the soil for Cain and the livestock for Abel.

Before the Law in the Old Testament was given, we have examples of tithing: Abraham responds to his victory and the blessing he receives from the priest-king Melchizedek by giving him a tenth of everything to him. Isaac and Jacob also tithed.

After the Law in the Old Testament was given, Leviticus 23 when God tells them to set the 'first fruits' of the harvest from the land He is to give to them before Him.

Leviticus 27: 'A tithe of everything [...] belongs to the Lord.'

This accords with the well known verse from 1 Chron 29:14 that we use in our Communion liturgy:

- **'All things come from you O Lord and of your own do we give you.'**

When we give to God, we are recognising and showing our gratitude for the fact that we are able to steward and enjoy what is ultimately God's.

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2. GOD'S REDEMPTION

- **Christian ethics (behaviour) are the ethics of RESPONSE**

1 John 4:19 'We love God because He first loved us.'

Everything we do in worship, service, love is a response to God's love for us first.

- **In response to the love of God shown to us in the gift of His Son, Jesus who died to redeem the world. We are BOUGHT AT A PRICE** (1 Cor 6:20)

The price Jesus paid to redeem us means we owe him everything. What would you do to respond to someone to whom you owed everything?

- **'Freely you have received, freely give'** (Matt 10:8)

Jesus asks us to make use of the gifts we have received from God to share with others so that others might know Him. One way to do that is free up the financial resources to support Christian ministry.

'What, giving again?' I asked in dismay.

'And must I keep giving and giving always.'

'Oh no,' said the angel whose gaze pierced me through.

'Just stop when the Saviour stops giving to you!'

Without your support, your/this church can never be what it could be. Without your support, the vision will wither on the vine. Without your support, there will not be the resources to do what you are called to do, to be the bearers of good news in a world of bad news, to be the bringers of light in a world full of darkness, to be the bringers of joy in a world full of sadness.