



Sunday, 16 April 2023
Called to be a Cheerful Giver

Good morning. When planning this year's morning services Darren gave today's talk the title, "How to be a Good Steward". That's OK. But immediately, at least in my mind, it begged the question, *What* is a steward?

This morning we're going to be talking about money. Not *just* money - although money will play a significant part in our content. That's because Darren's given the talk this morning the title, "Called to be a Cheerful Giver".

I was blessed when growing up with two significant influences in my life with regard to money. The first was my dad. Because from before I got my first pay packet he taught me how to run a simple debit and credit (income and expenditure) accounts book. And I needed this from before I started work anyway, because he loaned me money to buy my first set of working clothes and I was paying him back a bit at a time for about the first couple years of my working life. It helped me keep track of money and understand its value.

Let me take a short digression at this point, trusting that it's an OK place to go off at a slight tangent. You may have heard of an organisation called CAP - Christians Against Poverty. They've been around a few years now. They're one of a number of organisations who help people when they have debt problems. They help them work out where they are financially, get their debts consolidated, and work out a repayment plan. But they also run money courses through local outlets. Our neighbour church Ruislip Baptist have run these free courses irregularly over recent years, usually held one evening a week for three or four weeks. They help people work out budgets and to try keeping control of their finances. I attended one a few years back just to see what it was like, and they provide free workbooks and information as part of their methodology. I just mention this in case it might be helpful to anyone. Look up CAP on the internet for more details. OK - digression over.

So the second influence in my life regarding money was *here* - or to be more precise - out the back in the Joslin Room where we have refreshments. It was there I first joined a boy's Bible Class aged thirteen, and in the course of the Sunday Bible teaching, learn all about tithing and giving in general.

Tithing is an OT term. It was something the Israelite nation were directed to do to support their religious institution - first the tabernacle, and later the Temple. For tithe think 'tenth'. It was a very practical system of giving a tenth of income to support God's work. There were twelve tribes of Israel, but only eleven had an allocation of land. The twelfth tribe was the Tribe of Levi, and they had the responsibility of looking after the equipment and premises of their religious structure, so the tithe was both their wages and



also covered the running costs. And on top of this 'tithes' the nation was sometimes invited to give a free-will offering for a specific purpose, rather like today some churches might have, say, a 'roof fund' for an upcoming necessary repair.

Fast forward to the NT - and things get a bit complicated. Tithing was still around within the Jewish nation, but the spirit had gone out of it, witnessed to by some of the things Jesus had to say about the then current practices. Tithing was never supposed to be an end in itself. It was supposed to be a witness of a reverence towards their living God from within a person. But by Jesus day groups of the Jewish establishment had turned it into a legalistic, ritualistic practice, even tithing their herb plants. So... there's one sprig of mint for God, and 1,2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 sprigs for me. And so on.

Jesus comment about this - you've forgotten what it's all about. *Don't stop* giving God a tenth of your wealth, but do it with a right inner attitude and motive. And Jesus didn't mince His words. He told them that what He saw they looked like. On the outside they were beautifully ornate coffins - but on the inside - they were full of rotting corpses. And since being around dead bodies was a big no no for them, this would have (or perhaps should have) had a sting in it. Now God didn't want them to stop tithing. You only need to go to the book of Malachi to see Him accusing Israel of robbing Him by *not* tithing. It's just they'd lost the plot on their motivation for doing it.

But there were other offerings they could also give. You might recall Jesus comments about a poor widow who gave just two mites. The coins she gave two of was the smallest and least valuable in circulation in Judea. But if you wanted to be ostentatious, then size did matter. Where Jesus was sitting watching people give their offerings was a place which had up to thirteen different receptacles, called 'trumpets', for different collections. They were called trumpets because they looked like an inverted trumpet, narrow at the top and wide at the bottom. I'm not sure if they amplified the sound of a coin tingling into it, but bigger coins probably made more noise. And I don't need to elaborate on how if you wanted praise you could use these receptacles.

But Jesus - in drawing attention to what was going on - said what *He* saw was not at what they'd given - but what they could give - and how much it really cost them. Or as God said to the prophet Samuel years before in a different context, "Man looks at appearances but the LORD looks at the heart". Hold that thought. It's key to what I'm saying this morning.

Jesus is crucified, rises from the dead, and returns to His Father in Heaven, and the church age begins. And generosity (and unfortunately its opposite) are a mark of the Church right from the beginning. The beginning of the Book of Acts tells us that there was no needy person in the first assembly of



Christians in Jerusalem because of the members generosity. But it also tells us about a couple that had their life snuffed out because they lied to God the Holy Spirit over their book-keeping. The Bible is a 'warts and all' record.

As the Church grew, it rapidly spread through the Roman empire, and soon became inter-dependent, both in the sharing of its preachers and in the giving of its finances to God's work. But we aren't told too much about the way the early church structured its guidance for the amount of its giving.

For instance, we don't find 'tithing' associated with church giving in the NT. However, I suspect (but without any evidence) that the first Jewish Christians probably imported their previous methodology into their church practice. To me that seems probable. And it's true to say the idea of giving a tenth has stayed within Christian teaching right up to modern times, witnessed to by my upbringing in the Bible class out back here in the past.

Some years ago I was in Ghana, and I visited a church which had a ledge at the side of the pulpit. On it were piles of cards, and I was told these were 'tithing cards'. Not only did this church's congregation practice tithing, they also had a formal, structured, recorded way of doing it! But I tell that without making any comment on the rights or wrongs of such a system, and I draw your attention to the fact it was being practised in a different culture anyway.

I've already said the Bible in the church age is silent on the matter of tithing, or giving a tenth, as a directive, but let me tell you what I think about tithing. I think it's a good guide. Of course people then start to debate whether this is based on gross or nett income, and you begin to risk getting into the dangers of legalism. As far as I was concerned, it was always nett of tax and NI subtractions simply because it was about the money I controlled. But as I say, only a guidance, and if you're *really well off*, just a lower threshold.

Back to the Bible - and what we know is that generosity was a norm in the early church. Which brings us to the verses Darren nominated for this morning's talk from Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth to go with his title - and you'll find them in 2 Corinthians chapter 9 verses 6 & 7.

"Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver."

You might think from verse six that Paul's trying to twist their arms up their back. Maybe he is. He wouldn't be the only preacher to do that. But he



goes on to say, "Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion." So perhaps verse six is supposed to be an encouragement on what their generosity can achieve.

But by just reading these two verses gives a distorted picture, as most of chapters 8 & 9 are to do with generosity and giving, and I'm big on reading the Bible in context. So while the verses I've just read are to do with a collection for what might be termed the 'mother church' in Jerusalem, Paul personally had in the past been the recipient of generosity from another church - that in Philippi which is in an area of what's now Greece but used to be called Macedonia. And this is what he says about their generosity at the beginning of chapter 8 when he tells the Corinthians about the Philippians:

And now, brothers and sisters, 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. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people. And they exceeded our expectations: They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then, by the will of God, also to us.

These five verses almost require a study in themselves! For a start Paul's saying that here was a church in the midst of a crisis. It probably involved persecution. It usually did. It also seemed that they were a cash-strapped church. And I need to say, however poor we might feel, persecution today is creating poverty for many of our brothers and sisters around the world.

But there are two key things that Paul draws our attention to here - and I want to as well. First - and paramount - they *first* gave themselves to God.

I saw a church notice the other day. It read, "God wants a relationship with YOU - not your wallet or purse!". And if you haven't got that relationship, you'll find it very hard to be a generous giver long-term. Not impossible of course. There are many people who give generously as they see a need, but perhaps not many who fulfil the second thing Paul draws our attention to. They gave beyond their ability - and they did it with overflowing joy. Jesus story of watching the widow giving her all comes to mind again.

Now I know there are dangers to watch out for. I recall some years ago about someone worrying about their elderly mum who was responding to each and every begging letter or leaflet that came through her door. But I'm assuming that most of us are in control of our faculties to decide rationally over the decisions we make with our resources. And that might mean, particularly in our current financial climate, what we'd like to do, and what



we practically can do, may be two different things. But perhaps the question is, have we done those sums. Have we even *thought* about doing those sums. Back to Paul's injunction to the Corinthians. "Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver". Perhaps for cheerful, read willing.

But here I will draw your attention to something else Paul says to the Corinthians, in 2 Cor. 9:10, "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." He's back to his earlier metaphor of sowing, and he's basically says, 'God says - "be generous, and I'll give you more to be generous with". Or as 1 Chronicles tells us, everything we have comes from God, and we've only giving Him back what he gave us first anyway.

But you might also be sitting there saying to yourself, "OK, I hear what you're saying, but what do I give to, and for what purpose?". Paul in our reading was specifically raising a collection via his letter to the Corinthians to relieve the immediate hardship in the church in Jerusalem, and the Philippians' sacrificial giving supported Paul as the man who introduced them to Christ. But what about me? What does God want me to cheerfully give to?

Well people outside this building give lots of money to good causes every month. They are things that people have an interest in, even a passion for, and many are very worthwhile needs indeed. So, Guide Dogs for the Blind, Macmillan Nurses, and the many other needs we see splashed across our TV screens related to medical and poverty issues in the two thirds world. And they're all good. So for instance I give to WaterAid, and I've given to an assistance dogs charity in the past. But it's unlikely that people who haven't got Jesus as Saviour are going to give to the preaching of the Gospel, or the maintaining of His Church locally, nationally or worldwide.

You see, this building is only here because of you and the believers who met here before you. It's only *our money* that keeps it going. It's only our money that enables us to employ Darren. And the outlay here isn't inconsequential. In the last 16 months we've needed to buy two new boilers to ensure warmth in this building. And last year we had long overdue work done on our side driveway. And now were looking to fork out to renovate this floor which is 70 plus years old. And while it was Covid that drove our increase in technology, that also isn't a cheap option. And I really don't need to tell you in our current climate about utility costs, which we don't get government grants to help with. So perhaps the first thing to say is, an obvious need is contributions required here by your Christian fellowship for its fabric and its running costs.

But then there's the support of poorer brothers and sisters around the world.



And you know what - Paul would be so jealous of us today. He had to travel between assemblies of Christians to physical collect and count hard cash, and then transport it to Jerusalem with all the risks that entailed. We are *blessed* by so many virtually painless ways to get our contributions to their needed locations. That might be with the assistance of Stewardship Services or another similar organisation called CAF. Or it might be via a direct debt to the people you're supporting via their own system.

And the choice of things you can do with your giving is enormous. I was going to say 'out of this world'. Actually, in one sense, that's true. The Bible tells us that the bookkeeping of our individual generosity isn't keep on earth, but is recorded in eternity, because the Bible tells us that God is no man's debtor. But that's a whole different subject that can even affects our lives while on earth, and I for one have stories that I could tell that support that.

But I'll tell you of another area of need that only Christians are likely to be supporting. The translation of the Bible into indigenous languages, and the production and distribution of Bibles and other Christian literature into places that wouldn't otherwise receive it, either because of poverty or prejudice.

A question - How much do you value the Bible you have in your own language? Then another question - How much do you want others to be able to do the same? And then follow it up with the training and equipping of Christian pastors in parts of the world without our training institutions. Which begs yet another question - How much do you value the teaching and pastoring you receive in this church, or have via other churches in this country? So how much do you care for the spiritually under-fed Church in other parts of the world? And what about Christian broadcasting satellites (very expensive to run, at least one I know of) that put witness and support into countries you wouldn't otherwise be able to access. And I haven't even mentioned our seriously persecuted brothers and sisters who've had their churches and homes destroyed and their relatives murdered. Northern Nigeria and Mozambique come to mind as examples at the present time.

So if you scratch the surface out there you'll find many many needs you can give to, God guiding you.

But our subject this morning is how to be a *joyous* giver - not a begrudging, legalistic, 'if I have to', type of giver? Well, that comes back to motivation. So now... I have a question for you to briefly discuss amongst yourselves.

"What do you see as the powerhouse in your life to make you want to give?"

So why don't you quickly get into a small group with those closest around you and discuss that question just for a moment or two. It won't be too long, so please don't delay in getting started. The question again: "What do



you see as the powerhouse in your life to make you want to give?"

PAUSE & DISCUSS

For me - I know I'm motivated by seeing other people's need - and I know that I get frustrated when I find I haven't the where-with-all to help. But I'm also selective on the basis of what others probably wouldn't give too or perhaps know about. So I support, for instance, an organisation based just down the road in Greenford that provides legal support for oppressed and persecuted Christians in Pakistan - because it's not a big charity but is doing a big job in an under-reported environment.

I'm coming to a close - but as I do so - I want to go off at another tangent. Although, if we think of our talk's title of "being a cheerful giver", it really isn't.

You may be feeling very money poor at the moment. Even extremely money poor. And maybe what I've been saying this morning has made you feel a bit guilty. Sorry about that - it wasn't my intention. But do just check to see if it's me making you feel guilty or God the Holy Spirit. However, you might still be sitting there *very rich*. Rich in *time*. And also rich in experience.

You've got the time to pick up the phone and chat to a lonely person who nobody else has thought to ring for a long time. Time to take some disabled person out for a tea or coffee in some open air venue they'd never get to on their own. Time to be available - and be known to be available - to take someone in need to a medical appointment. And incidentally, that could be an easy-peasy do, because if they need that sort of help, maybe they've got a blue badge which, take it from me, makes life a whole lot easier. Time, and experience to go do something for somebody that is now beyond them, for whatever reason. Or time to just visit them and sit and chat to them. Basically, time to be known to be available, and to be reliable with it.

Or in a similar vein, time to help Sandra on a Wednesday morning with Teddy Bear Club. Or she'd probably say, more importantly, time to help set out and put away all the kit involved. Or be available to help with the many other tasks that a place like our Fellowship needs people to be involved in.

And if you're *really* time rich, you can find some volunteering to do. I was unemployed for more than three years after my first retirement and having taken a degree, in that time I did data entering for a couple of charities, stuffed envelopes for another, and ended up working for 22 years in the workshops of a development charity, as well as doing three Christian language camps in Belarus and helping kids read in a school for ten years.

I think you can see where I'm coming from. Money isn't the *only* thing that



you can be a cheerful giver with. In fact just giving money can sometimes be an easy alternative to giving what is *really* required. Jesus said those Pharisees throwing their cash into the trumpets should have been coming alongside people helping them carry their burdens, but they weren't.

Just one further thing. Some time ago I heard someone say, "Prayer is work". And if you've done any serious prayer on non-personal issues, you know exactly what I'm talking about. It's also often a solitary activity. So if you're neither rich or mobile, you can still do it. But is it giving? Oh yes - it's *definitely* giving! And if you don't know where to start, most Christian charities in whatever sector of service they work have some sort of prayer diary - be that an online presence or a hard copy prayer diary they send out.

I've finished. Let's take a moment to reflect.

And now let's close by singing 'Take my life and let it be consecrated Lord to Thee'. This is actually a prayer in song. So as we sing it, think about if you need to be praying it.

Granville Richards