



Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

A celebration of generosity

By Rev Dr Keith Garner

29 June 2014

Mark 12:38-44

38 As he taught, Jesus said, "Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, **39** and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. **40** They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. These men will be punished most severely." **41** Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. **42** But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a fraction of a penny. **43** Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. **44** They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything--all she had to live on."

We have reached that time of the year when we consider our giving in response to God. Throughout my ministry, I have observed the different ways in which people tackle this, with varying success.

Some churches develop specific programs and methods for raising people's giving. These can be very sophisticated and often involve graphs and drawings to help demonstrate both our need and our responsibility to support the work and witness of the church.

Let me say by way of introduction

Too many people have an unhelpful perception that the church is always asking for money, and this can lead to a response at the opposite end of the scale—when very little is actually said on this important theme.

Giving today is much more broadly exercised. Far fewer churches print weekly offering totals in service sheets or on boards at the entrance to church, primarily because the bulk of giving does not come through a weekly offering. Electronic means are more common.

In Australia, our tax deductibility patterns imposed by tax law are much more oriented towards not for profit organisations and causes other than for religious purposes. Here is a huge difference from the USA, the UK and the rest of Europe. This means there is no personal advantage such as in the USA—or added value to the church as in the UK. In turn, this results in giving as a genuine response to a cause—in this case that of Christian witness.

Therefore, what should my approach be? Along with my colleagues, I have chosen to explore the theme of generosity over a period of three weeks. We shall then give people the opportunity to make a pledge together. The three addresses will follow the following themes:

- A Celebration of Generosity
- The Generous Pattern of Giving
- The Challenge of Generosity

I turn to the very familiar gospel incident which we know as 'The Widow's Offering'. It is introduced by Mark with words that reveal Jesus' critique of the religious leaders of the day on two counts: firstly, the shallowness of their teaching; and, secondly, the showmanship of their religious practice.

Jesus knew the difference between giving as a performance for others to recognise—and giving out of a generous heart. It is for this reason that Jesus celebrates the generosity of this widow. The difference in her attitude is plain for all to see.

What do we mean by generosity?

There are many definitions that people tend to work with and the concept has many brothers and sisters in rich words such as liberality, magnanimity, open-handedness and so on. A simple definition for me would be 'giving without expecting anything in return'.

Generosity is not based upon one's economic status, but flows from the passion of a person's life. That is why this widow is so significant in Jesus' teaching on giving as an example of generosity.

Some understanding of the layout of the temple might be helpful in acknowledging what is actually happening in this useful gospel cameo. Between the Court of the Gentiles and the Court of the Women was the Beautiful Gate. It is perhaps here that Jesus takes time to rest and be quiet, following the tension with the religious leaders recorded earlier in the chapter.

It is of interest that Jesus had been teaching about the way widows suffer at the hands of religious leaders.

From his position, he was able to observe what was happening in relation to the thirteen collecting points in the Court of the Women. These receptacles were often known as the 'trumpets'—not because of any noise, but because of their shape—though there is an interesting analogy to be drawn when people trumpet their own giving. Many people threw in considerable amounts of money and would certainly be conscious of both their visibility and the noise that such a donation would create.

We are told that while Jesus was sitting there, a widow came alongside the collecting receptacles and discreetly gave two small copper coins. I recall listening to a long sermon discussing the material value of the currency. The point is simply that they were tiny in value, but not to this woman who had very little.

Jesus calls the disciples to him. They are either sitting or standing nearby. His words form a great text for us:

"Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They gave out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty, put in everything and all she had to live on."
(Mark 12:43-44)

These thirteen receptacles would be for various causes, but we are told that the money was for the temple treasury. This incident becomes a great example of what it means to give, but is explained by contrasting rich people, who could afford to give a great deal to the temple treasury, with a poor widow, who had little to live on. As Tom Wright put it, "Her sacrifice, though small, was total."

Jesus celebrated the generosity of this widow. Each time we gather for worship, we celebrate the giving nature of God—for example we see his love in hope, forgiveness and the promise

of eternal life. Moreover, in the season of Pentecost, we acknowledge his gift to us in the Holy Spirit.

GENEROSITY BEGINS IN HUMILITY

We know that all we have and all we are is the result of the generous nature of God.

- God's love in creation
- God's provision for all our needs
- God's gifting in our lives

Part of our challenge is to resist believing that we are able to buy things because we have earned the money; thereby separating it from God's provision. If our gifts in life enable us to earn money to buy things, this does not allow us to ignore the fact that it is still God's gifting that makes this possible.

Jesus compares the widow's gift with the gifts of the rich and powerful. They made a show of their offering. The noise made when the rich gave drowned out the sound of their gift. However, the noise of the widow's gift of two small coins drowned out the noise of the temple. The Son of God knew which gift was the more valuable!

Grace is another word for generosity. God's nature is gracious, so his generosity is simply part of who he is. He is at work amongst us, calling for the same generosity to be displayed in our lives.

I am sure you are familiar with the kind of narrative which runs, "We've tax, we've mortgages, we've utility bills and transport and all this is quite apart from the cost of food and entertainment—there is no end to it!"

To talk about giving in church can be a tough call and certainly doesn't draw crowds. We remind ourselves, however, that one of the central texts of our faith must be "God so loved the world that he gave ..." (John 3:16)

The humility of this woman is a lesson for us all. Some of us may have wanted to counsel her to hold one of the coins back, because she might need it!

GENEROSITY GROWS OUT OF LOVE

Real generosity grows out of love. This is the great biblical principle, "We love God because he first loved us." (1 John 4:19)

Through the daily blessings of our lives, we observe that:

- So many talents have been given to us
- So much opportunity is available to us
- We have access to the love of Christ
- The gifts of his Spirit are distributed freely

We recognise his love for all, but also for ourselves.

You will know that I enjoy the movies, but *Seabiscuit* is not really my kind of film. However, it portrays a powerful story.

In the film, Tom Smith, an old farrier and horse trainer, had different ideas about training and knowing which horses had the heart to race. A wealthy American businessman, Charles

Howard, had an undersized horse with knobby knees named Seabiscuit. His former owners thought he had potential but gave up on him because he was considered to be lazy.

Down on his luck, Red Pollard was an angry young jockey, thought by many to be too tall to be a successful jockey. He was chosen to ride Seabiscuit. All of his life, Red had this gift to ride but only Charles Howard and Tom Smith had the belief in him to achieve this.

Red disappoints them in a race and his temper gets the better of him. He is consumed by doubt and he is not sure he is welcome any more. But just as he is leaving, he remembers some words of his father: "You have a gift"—and he returns. In returning Red finds acceptance, welcome and the beginning of healing.

Red asks Howard if he can borrow some money. Howard happily agrees, even though Red doesn't know when he can pay him back. He asked Howard for \$10 and yet Howard hands him \$20. Howard's generosity overwhelms Red.

The next scene shows the effect that generosity can have on a person. While riding in a race, he is talking to Seabiscuit and says, "That's it, Pop, we're OK now. It's alright boy. Nothing to worry about." Those words turn out to be more a commentary about his life than they are an encouragement to the horse.

Our life at Wesley Mission has always been strengthened by people who have given not because they have to, or because they have been told to, but because of their love of God. God honours obedience and those who are generous.

This is a far bigger issue than merely being about money. Our generosity must spill over in our forgiveness, in our gracious attitude towards others and in our time to care.

GENEROSITY IS A RESULT OF THANKSGIVING

One of the reasons God honours obedience to him is because essentially it grows out of thankfulness. I can only begin to imagine that this woman's gift was given out of a deep sense of gratitude—and many may have looked at her and wondered what she had to be grateful for. Still, she was!

Many a preacher has made use of the three different kinds of giving. There is Grudge giving, Duty giving or Thanks-giving. Grudge giving gives but doesn't really want to and is forced into it either by peer pressure or guilt. Duty giving gives simply because it's supposed to and is afraid of the consequences if it doesn't. But Thanks-giving gives out of the spirit of love and gratitude, which grows from a loving relationship with God.

Not too long ago, I went to see a recently-released film about Charles Dickens. It showed that writers would often give readings and there was a time when another writer, Rudyard Kipling, was so popular that his writings were enormously expensive. A few college students, who didn't appreciate Kipling's writings, got together and facetiously sent him a letter, enclosing an old ten shilling note. They wrote, "Please send us your best word." They received a reply from Kipling which simply consisted of one word: "Thanks".

Jesus heard the silent thanks those two little coins made in the temple and celebrated the woman's generosity. Real giving has about it a mark of the sacrificial. The amount of the gift is not the main issue; it is the cost to the giver. Real generosity will give until it hurts.

One writer reminded us, "It may well be a sign of the decadence of the church and the failure of our Christianity that gifts have to be coaxed out of church people, and that often they will not give at all unless they can get something back in the way of entertainment or of goods."

George Müller began the wonderful children's orphanages in Bristol in the West Country of England. He was a man of great faith and often had little money to buy food for the large number of children in his care.

I recall one of his favourite sayings: "God judges what we give by what we keep."

It is helpful that we have handed down to us from the New Testament a pattern of generosity from a gift that was so very small.

The person who is rich in this world is not the person who has much, but the person who gives much. Robert South once said, "If there be any truer measure of a person than by what they do, it must be by what they give."

Dr Karl Menninger once asked a very wealthy patient, "What on earth are you doing with all that money?"

The patient replied, somewhat reluctantly, "Just worrying about it, I suppose."

"Well," Menninger went on, "do you get that much pleasure out of worrying about it?"

"No," replied the patient. "But I get such terror when I think of giving some of it to someone else."

This was not a problem to this wonderful widow, whose generosity must always be, for us, a cause for celebration.