



Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

The challenge of generosity

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Luke 6:27-38

27 "But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, **28** bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. **29** If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt. **30** Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. **31** Do to others as you would have them do to you. **32** "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. **33** And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that. **34** And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, expecting to be repaid in full. **35** But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. **36** Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. **37** "Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. **38** Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you."

In the final address in this short series of three on the theme of generosity, I conclude with a challenge for us all. Generosity calls for more than our admiration.

In this series, we have focused on the concept of generosity. If you ask a group of people to define generosity, a good many wonderful ideas would emerge. One university chaplain did just this exercise, which highlighted related qualities such as graciousness, caring, being open, hospitality, without thought of self, listening, giving of yourself freely, magnanimity and so on. He commented, "I have yet to hear a bad word said against generosity!"

However, our enthusiasm for the thought should not be assumed to mean that we have been successful in translating it into deeds or, to be more precise, into being a people of a generous disposition.

One preacher amused his parishioners when they thought he'd made a mistake when his sermon title was published. The theme was "The Sermon on the Amount". They were soon disarmed as he launched into his sermon!

As we consider our own giving, we may feel the primary question being asked is "What shall we give?" when in point of fact the real question is "In what spirit do we give?"

For each and every Christian, giving has a spiritual dimension ... and it relates to how we respond to God in Christ.

In Luke for Everyone, Tom Wright comments in relation to Luke 6:27-38, "The kingdom that Jesus preached and lived was all about a glorious, uproarious, absurd generosity." He went on to explain that the way to understand it is to "think of the best thing you can do for the worst person, and go ahead and do it. Think of what you'd really like someone to do for you, and do it for them. Think of people to whom you are tempted to be nasty, and lavish generosity on them instead."

The point that Jesus was making was not to introduce a new rule book. For the Jews that was a well-trodden path! They were strong on dos and don'ts. Jesus points to the attitude of heart—and that has to be the secret of all giving and indeed all living.

One writer commented on our gospel reading: "There is no commandment of Jesus which has caused so much discussion and debate as the commandment to love our enemies. Before we can obey it we must discover what it means."

The same writer talked about 'agapan' which is the Greek word selected by Luke to describe such love. It is an active feeling of benevolence towards another: "it means that no matter what that person does to us we will never allow ourselves to desire anything but their highest good."

It is this spirit of generosity which becomes the basis of our giving. Our text is a fascinating one, which has much to say to us:

"Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you." (Luke 6:38)

How, then, can we become a generous people? The answer may be easy to express, but it is so difficult to practise. It seems to be bound up with our attitude to material possessions.

We may not like the preacher talking about money, but we must remind ourselves that Jesus spoke about money more often than any other issue. One writer went as far as to say, "He has more to say about money than immorality—not because it is necessarily more important, but because he saw in it an ever present peril and opportunity."

The desire to possess is a very powerful one. How much space do our local papers give to the property market? Not too long ago a city centre block of apartments in Sydney went on sale and all were sold within half an hour.

In our context when someone uses the words 'we are downsizing' it causes all kinds of mixed thoughts. This kind of conversation makes little sense when it takes place in a community where so many cannot even contemplate owning a property.

Yet generosity is not to be understood in terms of how much people have. Some of the most generous people I have known had little by way of possessions. We need to put generosity into a broader setting.

It is for this reason that I made the point in an earlier address that generosity is linked to grace. God does not exercise his grace because we need it, but we do; he exercises it because it is his very nature to be gracious.

Another wrote, "Not only does understanding the gospel of the grace of God provide a proper motive for us to share our faith, it also gives us the proper motive and means to live the Christian life effectively."

It was Martyn Lloyd-Jones who said, "It is grace at the beginning, and grace at the end. So that when you and I come to lie on our death beds, the one thing that should comfort and help and strengthen us there is the thing that helped us in the beginning. Not what we have been, not what we have done, but the grace of God in Jesus Christ our Lord. The Christian life starts with grace, it must continue with grace, it ends with grace. Grace wondrous grace. By the grace of God I am what I am. Yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me."

In Luke 6, the gospel addresses what became known as 'The Golden Rule' and reveals two important facts about the Christian life. Firstly, that this life is positive and consists not of the things we don't do, but in the positive things we do. This ran against the grain of much of the teaching of the time. Secondly, the Christian life is based on what we might want to call the extra thing.

It may be a paradox when we think of generosity in terms of some of our biblical truths. When I refer back to 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 and Paul's conversation with the Corinthian Christians about help to be taken to Jerusalem to support God's people there, we read about begging for the privilege of giving money away; speaking of One who became poor to make others rich through his poverty; speaking of God repaying the generous giver with more than riches.

The supreme paradox would appear to be the one that has the most profound application—that God blesses generosity and we have to be careful that we do not understand this in terms of worldly prosperity, but that those who are given more resources are equally given growing opportunities to give more.

I want to take three words and explore them as important in considering how we understand our giving:

THE NATURE OF 'TITHING'

In the Christian Church, the concept of 'tithing' is familiar, but often misunderstood. Tithing is a biblical standard. It is built upon the acknowledgement that everything we have and are comes from God and is God's to begin with, and all that God asks is that we return a portion as a means of giving thanks.

The giving of ten per cent of all we have shocks many people initially. It is returning the first fruits rather than the left-overs. One of the neatest descriptions of how the tithe works in practise is found in 2 Chronicles 31. Hezekiah was the King of Judah and during the Jewish Feast of Unleavened Bread a request went out for giving.

We read: "As soon as the order went out, the Israelites generously gave the first fruits of their grain, new wine, oil and honey and all that the fields produced. They brought a great amount, a tithe of everything." (2 Chronicles 31:5)

God wants us to give out of the bounty of our lives, not the left-overs! In saying that the tithe is God's standard, we would also say that it is a matter of faith:

- Faith and trust that God will still supply for our needs, despite our response in this way to him
- Faith to confront the way we order our possessions
- Faith to take the necessary steps, rather than merely making an emotional response

It is from this concept of the tithe that we have developed 'proportional giving'. This is a far healthier model than one akin to 'paying dues'!

It is a huge relief when we are liberated in our giving and don't seek to compare ourselves with others. Others must never become our standard. It is true that many people are able to testify to how their lives felt more wholesome once they began to tithe.

- This is not some kind of manipulation by God
- It is not to be understood as 'cutting a deal' with God
- It is not ever to be seen as a way to prosperity
- It is an act of commitment in recognising God's grace in our lives

In recent years, it was the business writer Peter Drucker who wrote, "Unless commitment is made, there are only promises and hopes ... but no plans."

One of the most moving services I ever took part in was in Kenya in Africa. At the time of the offering, people brought not only money but things grown on their farms, albeit modest farms. It helped to drive home the thought that the 'tithe' is part of the whole, which we acknowledge is God's by right.

THE 'OFFERING'

If we attend church regularly, we will have observed many times at the moment when the prayer is offered after taking up the weekly collection that the words 'tithes and offerings' are used. Some might well ask, what the difference is between the two:

- An offering is where our giving begins ... beyond the tithe
- It is above a tithe and poured out in joy and gratitude to God
- It is to be distinguished by motivation—for it is an offering that is motivated by sacrificial love

When we give an offering, we are offering something that actually costs us and is in response to the selfless love of Christ.

Illustrations of sacrificial offering are not always so easy to find, but there is an interesting one in a movie called *I am Sam*, about an intellectually challenged man who is raising his daughter, Lucy, on his own. Lucy is in the early days of school and desperately in need of a new pair of school shoes. Money is very tight for Sam and four of his friends who all work at the local Starbucks. What they are paid barely covers their accommodation and food, but Sam and his friends together head out to buy Lucy a pair of shoes.

They take the task very seriously and each of them searches for what they think is the perfect pair of shoes. Occasionally, their choice is totally inappropriate. The salesperson is somewhat frustrated, but co-operates and Lucy finds a pair of shoes. Sam then asks the attendant the price. "Sixteen dollars with tax," he answers.

Sam pulls all his money out, which amounts to just over six dollars. He begins to explain why he didn't get his whole money this week. Then all the friends, who are in no better financial shape than Sam, start digging in their pockets and pulling out their money. They lay it on the counter and find it is just enough. Lucy smiles and they all leave the shop with balloons.

This simple scene is one that demonstrates the sacrificial nature of an offering. No-one asked the colleagues to help, but because of their respect and love for Sam and Lucy, they pooled what they had and offered it.

THE 'SPECIAL GIFT'

This kind of giving takes us into the realm of generosity and love.

One afternoon three children entered a florist's shop, two boys and a girl. They were only nine or ten years of age. One boy gazed around the store, somewhat doubtfully, then came up to the person who owned the store and said, "Sir, we'd like something in yellow flowers."

Their nervous manner made the man think that this was a very special occasion. He showed them some inexpensive yellow spring flowers. The boy who seemed to be acting as the spokesperson shook his head and said, "No, I think we'd like something better than that." The man asked, "Do they have to be yellow?" The boy answered, "Yes, sir. You see, Mickey would like them better if they were yellow. He had a yellow sweater and we think he liked yellow more than any other colour." The man asked, "Are they for his funeral?" The boy nodded and suddenly choked up.

It was obvious that the little girl was desperately struggling to keep back the tears. "She's his sister," the other boy said. They went on to explain how the boy had been hit by a truck while playing in the street. The children in the area had taken a collection and told the proprietor what they had raised, which was very much less than anything he sold. The boys continued to look around and one asked the question, "Would yellow roses cost a lot?"

The man smiled gently. "It just happens that I have some nice yellow roses that I am selling today for exactly what you've got."

Such a gift comes out of generosity and love—on both sides of the counter. Giving responds to specific circumstances.

The love of God that we see in Jesus Christ is at the heart of our understanding God's gift.

One crucial test of practical generosity is the use of our money. Money is far more than a mere means of exchange. It can be understood as the liquid form of our wealth. If we use that analogy, we can freeze money and simply turn it into possessions, or we can boil money up to turn it into various sorts of power: we can use it to impress our friends, gain more for ourselves, use it to guard against the proverbial rainy day.

Money, however, can be a blessing whereby we reach out to help others, to maintain and enhance God's work. But our attitude to all these things is what will determine what our response will be.

Just as in a time of evangelism we lift up the cross because we know that this lies at the centre of all we do and is the focus which draws people to Christ—so, when we consider our giving, we know that the cross, which is the demonstration of God's enormous love for us, is equally important for us to consider in relation to our response.

One day at church the stewards came down the aisle to take up the offering. Suzie asked her mum what was happening. "They are taking up the offering and this is where you can put your coin in," her mother answered. Anxiously, Suzie replied, "But this is for Jesus, you told me so."

Mother explained that's exactly what giving in the plate meant. The open plate left far too much for Suzie to observe and so when it came down the row, she placed her coin on the plate, turned to her mother and said, "If that is the money for Jesus, why is there so little of it?"

I have entitled this address 'The Challenge of Generosity'. I wonder what answer you would have given to Suzie's question.

I conclude with some words of C S Lewis, which to me are the acid test in terms of what we should give: "The only safe rule is to give more than we can afford."