

GATEWAY CHURCH NORTHUMBERLAND

13.7.14

Giving Part 2 – Joss Bray

Last week we looked at what God gives to us – and it's a long list.

What does he give us?

Here are a few highlights – he has given us his son Jesus – the most precious gift and the reason we can be forgiven and saved. We now have a hope for the future as well as faith for the present. We have the gift of a new life now and a new citizenship – the earth is not our home anymore – we have a heavenly space reserved for us.

Jesus did not leave us alone here when he ascended to heaven – he gave his Spirit to us for counsel and comfort. The spirit gives us gifts from God to do what he has called us to, to build each other up and glorify him. He also grows fruit in us so we become more like Jesus - being transformed into his image.

We have the freedom to say no to sin – to know what is right and wrong and resist temptation – although we often fail – God's love and mercy are such that we do not get what we deserve – instead we get what we don't deserve, the grace of God. Undeserved wholehearted approval and blessing.

We are clothed with righteousness – robes from God which are totally clean now – God sees us as holy people – we can stand before him with confidence and not be ashamed or burnt up because of sin.

We have been given a purpose and a mission – there is a point to our lives and he supplies us with whatever we need – that is his promise. From the creation we live in to the food on the table – it is his gift to us.

He has also given us each other – we are God's gift to each other! He shows his love for us through each other and in so many other ways – his heart is to give – which brings us on to -

How does he give?

He gives generously, without limit. He never runs out of anything. There are no strings attached. He does not give grudgingly.

When he gives – it is a gift – it sounds obvious – but sometimes we have this feeling that it is a loan – or if we don't live up to some standard, it will be taken away. So for example, the gifts of the spirit – they are gifts. They are not “loans” of the spirit. Even when a person falls into sin in a big way, they can still be used by God with these gifts. We can all think of people who have been far from perfect whom God has used to advance his kingdom – and it is just as well he doesn't need perfect people or we would be in a bit of trouble!

Jesus – being the most precious gift – was given totally to the world and he gave everything he had to those who didn't deserve it. He didn't expect payback – there is nothing we can do to repay him - that is the grace of God.

So if we can have an understanding of how he gives then we will be better able to demonstrate his character in us as we give. Of course we need the love and power to change that the Holy Spirit brings to do what God has called us to do. It's not about rules and formulas – giving is about something quite different.

What are we called to give?

What can we see in the bible about God's people and giving? It's not just about money! In fact it's not much about money – it is about our heart.

First of all, we give worship to God – we are called first of all to be worshippers:

JN 4:23 a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks.

And that means our whole lives are an expression of worship:

RO 12:1 Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God--this is your spiritual act of worship.

In all we do we give our lives to God:

1CO 15:58Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

When we realise this, then other things come into perspective. We know that being disciples isn't a Sunday affair – our lives are not our own – or we shouldn't see them like that!

So our whole lives should be giving to God – this is our act of worship. Whenever we help someone, encourage someone, go the extra mile, spend time listening, support someone, pray with someone, give to someone – this is all worship – in a mysterious way. It brings glory to God because we do it in the name of Jesus and his kingdom is advanced – we are carriers of his kingdom in the world.

What about money though?

Well – here's the thing – people tend to get worked up about this and disagreements abound. There are many pitfalls in even discussing giving money. We will all have had different experiences of giving and receiving. There will have been different teaching and practice in the churches we have been part of and some of us would be able to tell stories of pickles that people and churches have got into around the issue of giving money.

(Apologies to visitors today - this is not a call to give to this church! We have plenty at the moment - thank God - and we are looking to give not to receive!)

When we look at giving money we need to be doing it with the same heart that God has when he gives us so many things and in particular we need to look at what the bible says and see if we can get some principles from there.

So let's start with tithing

Controversy abounds here – so care is needed!

“Tithe” appears 13 times and “tithes” appears 14 times – all in the Old Testament mostly in the same passages. The word “tithing” does not appear at all.

Tithes comprised of one tenth of the grain, animals, fruit etc. but there were also burnt offerings, sacrifices, special gifts and freewill offerings mentioned as well the first born animals (which were not counted in the tenth). The Israelites were permitted to eat these things and be blessed.

DT 12: 6there bring your burnt offerings and sacrifices, your tithes and special gifts, what you have vowed to give and your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks.

7 There, in the presence of the LORD your God, you and your families shall eat and shall rejoice in everything you have put your hand to, because the LORD your God has blessed you.

DT 14:22 Be sure to set aside a tenth of all that your fields produce each year. 23 Eat the tithe of your grain, new wine and oil, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks in the presence of the LORD your God at the place he will choose as a dwelling for his Name, so that you may learn to revere the LORD your God always

Tithes were the way that Levites – the priestly clan – were paid and could live. Out of this, the Levites offered a tenth of that as an offering to the Lord. Tithes were also used to feed the poor.

DT 14:28 At the end of every three years, bring all the tithes of that year's produce and store it in your towns, 29 so that the Levites (who have no allotment or inheritance of their own) and the aliens, the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns may come and eat and be satisfied, and so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands.

But it was complicated:

LEV 27:30 " `A tithe of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees, belongs to the LORD; it is holy to the LORD. 31 If a man redeems any of his tithe, he must add a fifth of the value to it. 32 The entire tithe of the herd and flock--every tenth animal that passes under the shepherd's rod--will be holy to the LORD. 33 He must not pick out the good from the bad or make any substitution. If he does make a substitution, both the animal and its substitute become holy and cannot be redeemed.' "

The Levites were in charge of the tithe:

NE 10:37 "..... crops to the Levites, for it is the Levites who collect the tithes in all the towns where we work. 38 A priest descended from Aaron is to accompany the Levites when they receive the tithes, and the Levites are to bring a tenth of the tithes up to the house of our God, to the storerooms of the treasury

Can I commend Malachi 3 and 4 – amazing stuff about Jesus's first and second coming. In Malachi, this is where we find the oft quoted:

MAL 3:8 "Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me. "But you ask, 'How do we rob you?' "In tithes and offerings. 9 You are under a curse--the whole nation of you--because you are robbing me. 10 Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "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.

This has been interpreted as the priests being reprimanded because they were in charge of the tithe that was brought in and were not putting an appropriate amount into the temple storerooms for the poor. The specific curse was on Israel “the whole nation of you”. Now that is difficult to understand but we can see time and again Israel ignoring God – even after the most amazing things he did for them. They just couldn’t seem to keep remembering. It was like they kept meeting God but then forgot who he was.

Things are different now – God gave us his Holy Spirit so he actually lives in us. Our relationship with God is under the new covenant. We are not under a curse – we are under grace – and the same goes for Jewish Christians too – the remnant who believe in Jesus. We do not live under the Levitical rules any more.

So what do we see about giving and money in the New Testament?

First of all – Jesus wasn’t very impressed with mechanistic tithing:

LK 11:42 "Woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God.

It was ok to tithe but useless without the justice and love of God.

When he was sending his 12 disciples out said:

MT 10: Freely you have received, freely give. ⁹ Do not take along any gold or silver or copper in your belts; ¹⁰ take no bag for the journey, or extra tunic, or sandals or a staff; for the worker is worth his keep.

The principle was – give as you have received – and all your needs will be supplied. And they were. It is as simple as that. They had to rely totally on God. Even the temple tax was no problem:

MT 17:27 ".....go to the lake and throw out your line. Take the first fish you catch; open its mouth and you will find a four-drachma coin. Take it and give it to them for my tax and yours."

In the early church we read this well known passage:

AC 4:32 All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. ³³ With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. ³⁴ There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales ³⁵ and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.

This seems to go a whole lot further than tithing! A few points here:

The believers were one in heart and mind – isn't that what we want the church to be like? The outworking of that was that they didn't count things as their own for their sole use, but shared everything. There was power there and much grace – the unmerited favour of God was evident. They were responding to what God had done for them and the natural response was to behave in a similar way towards each other.

People sold things and brought the proceeds to be shared out. Note – it does not seem likely they sold their only house - as the church would have nowhere to meet.

Although on occasion that might actually mean sacrificially giving everything:

^{MK 12:41} 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. ^{MK 12:43} Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, 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."

It's not about the amount – it is about the heart.

This is illustrated by the story of Ananias and Sapphira:

^{AC 5:1} Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. ² With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet. ^{AC 5:3} Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? ⁴ Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied to men but to God." ^{AC 5:5} When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. ⁶ Then the young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him. ^{AC 5:7} About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. ⁸ Peter asked her, "Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?" "Yes," she said, "that is the price." ^{AC 5:9} Peter said to her, "How could you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also." ^{AC 5:10} At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband. ¹¹ Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.

The thing that they did wrong was to lie – their heart was wrong. It would have been fine to bring any amount from the sale and be honest about it, but God was not impressed with that sort of dishonesty.

What is our attitude in giving?

2CO 9:6 Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. ⁷ Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸ And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.

It's about being generous, not reluctant, not because we feel we ought to and to do it cheerfully. God loves this.

Giving comes with a promise from God – a generous reaping and having all we need to do everything God has called us to. Note – this is not so we can live it up and sit back and just enjoy it – it is so we can “abound in every good work”. This is not the so called “prosperity gospel” that we can encounter. “Give to this ministry and you will be blessed and prosper” – this is a misleading message and not what the bible says.

We give out of what we have and are willing to give. I cannot see that we should go into debt to give.

2CO 8:12 For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have.

And we should not boast in any way:

MT 6:2 "So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. ³ But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

So everyone should decide in his heart what to give – both in terms of money but also time and effort – it may be a tenth of everything – it may be more – it may be less, but we should give cheerfully and without pride.

Next week we will look more into who we should be giving to and how we should do it.