

GATEWAY CHURCH NORTHUMBERLAND

20.7.14

Giving – Part 3 – Joss Bray

This is the third talk on giving – in the first we looked at what God has given us – which is mind blowing if we could get a grip of it.

The second was about how we should give – whilst thinking about how God gives to us. He gives lavishly and open handedly – he doesn't loan his gifts to us. Gifts from God are not dependent on our performance or worthiness. Thankfully, he does not wait for us to be perfect. God gives gifts to all of us – and these are to build each other up and promote the kingdom of God. We also looked at how God wants worshippers and our whole lives are spiritual acts of worship and therefore in all we do there is a giving of our lives to God.

The conclusion was: Everyone should decide in their 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.

The decision is for each of us and it is between us and God, and when we have decided we give without grumbling or resentment and without trumpeting it in the streets as it were. After all, we have freely received, and we are called to freely give.

What is our attitude to money?

Jesus was followed by people who gave up everything they had to follow him. Some found it harder than others – remember the rich young man:

"Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?" ^{MT 19:21} Jesus answered, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." ^{MT 19:22} When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth.

For the rich young man, money was the stumbling block to following Jesus. In fact it wasn't actually money, but his attachment to it. Remember Paul had things to say to Timothy about money:

¹TI 6:6 But godliness with contentment is great gain. ⁷ For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. ⁸ But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. ⁹ People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. ¹⁰ For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

The writer of Hebrews also makes the point:

HEB 13:5 Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." HEB 13:6 So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?"

The point is that loving money is pointless and stops people relying on God – who is far more able to provide eternal security than money. We often drift into the “if I just had £x thousand pounds then everything would be ok” – I have done it myself this week! God has said he will supply our needs. He is our helper. What more do we need to know?

Jesus attitude to money.

This is very interesting and not what many people might imagine. Remember the episode when expensive perfume was poured over his feet and the disciples were “indignant”:

MK 14:3 While he was in Bethany, reclining at the table in the home of a man known as Simon the Leper, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard. She broke the jar and poured the perfume on his head. MK 14:4 Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, "Why this waste of perfume? ⁵ It could have been sold for more than a year's wages and the money given to the poor." And they rebuked her harshly. MK 14:6 "Leave her alone," said Jesus. "Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. ⁷ The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me. ⁸ She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial. ⁹ I tell you the truth, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her." MK 14:10 Then Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve, went to the chief priests to betray Jesus to them.

Jesus was interested in the heart of the woman to minister to him – not the cost of the perfume. He was clear that the poor were there and needed help, and he encouraged his disciples to help them, but her worship came first. This was too much for Judas – perhaps he could not grasp that the money was not the most important thing. He lost sight of Jesus and following him – instead he followed earthly reasoning – he was indignant.

This is a lesson to us – we must not lose sight of our primary purpose to follow Jesus – churches so often struggle with

arguments about money and it can be tragic. God has lots of money to give as he wishes – it always needs to be about him, not a money raising target or a financial strategy – but trusting him first – and all the rest will follow.

Who should we be giving to?

We note that in the early church, the money was brought to the “apostle’s feet” as we read in Acts 4.

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 wasn’t so they could have exotic foreign holidays or buy expensive cars – it was so they could distribute it as needed – primarily in the church family. It wasn’t to build up their platform ministry. Paul still made tents when he was travelling and tried not to be a financial burden on churches – although he got a bit steamed up about it. (If you are interested then 1 Corinthians 9 is the place to look to see some of his thinking).

Remember that Jesus said “you can help the poor whenever you want” – so feel free to give whatever you decide, to the poor and needy you are in contact with or have a link to. This includes giving to each other in the church – although there are pitfalls in this and maybe seeking wisdom from leaders if in any doubt would be a good idea. There are “wolves in sheep’s clothing” - people who deliberately obtain money off people in a deceptive and manipulating way and use church relationships to do that. The flock needs protection from them and it’s the shepherd’s job to do that.

Jesus said:

MT 10:16 I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.

Apart from that warning, interestingly, there doesn’t seem to be a distinction made by Jesus or the apostles between different sorts of genuinely poor people. There is a temptation to think of the “deserving” and the “undeserving poor” – i.e. those who have or

have not “brought it upon themselves”. This is a tricky area. When we think about it – we are all undeserving and have done many things that if it wasn’t for the mercy of God we could be judged for. So however someone ends up in need, they are the poor and needy and we should consider helping them. This may not be just about money (if at all) – it may be helping them to get benefits or good financial advice, food parcels or helping them get suitable accommodation or into treatment – for example.

Where should the money that is given into the church go?

1. To members of the body:

When we give to the church – remember who we are giving to – it is each other first and foremost – we are the church. It should not be seen as going somewhere else or given to an institution. It is for us all – remember the apostles “distributed to anyone as he had need” so “there were no needy persons among them”. Note it appears that no one gave so much that they ended up being needy – which would be counterproductive. No one was in need. Interestingly it doesn’t say everyone had exactly the same, but the attitude was that no one counted his possessions as his own and people shared what they had.

This has to be a guiding principal for us as it was for the early church. They looked after each other with distributions of money and food to those who didn’t have enough – there was no welfare state for the widows and orphans and homeless then. There is one now – of sorts – but the calling on us is still the same – there should be no needy persons amongst us.

However, distributing money can often be a bit of a stumbling block. I wonder why we hear more about the church giving to outside good causes rather than teaching about looking after each other. Hidden attitudes can be revealed like – “why are we giving to him or her – do they deserve it” or just “how much????”. We must remember that it is biblical to support each other and that we should aim for no one being in need. The church leaders had the job of distributing what had been brought to them – not an easy job I would say – so please bear with leaders in this! Also, if there are people who are needy in the church but the leaders don’t know – then consider flagging that up with them. Indeed if you are in need yourself, definitely flag it up!

2. To other churches:

This happened among the early churches – here is one example -

AC 11:27 During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. ²⁸ One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.) ²⁹ The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea. ³⁰ This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

Let's help churches we know who are struggling - there may not be a famine, but there may be other needs, and if we hear of them, let's consider helping if we can. They may be in Jerusalem, Judea or the ends of the earth!

This is what Paul had to say to the church in Corinth -

2CO 8:13 Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. ¹⁴ At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality, ¹⁵ as it is written: "He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little."

3. To the poor:

As a church body we are also reminded to remember the poor:

GAL 2:9 James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the Jews. ¹⁰ All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.

So we can give as a church to the poor with money and time – whether by being involved in the food bank, the drop in, collections for specific people, causes and appeals and so on. Also remember that people can be “poor in spirit” - feeling lonely, hopeless, worthless and having no meaning in their life – remember – Jesus said “theirs is the kingdom of heaven” – and we can be part of bringing the kingdom to them.

In conclusion:

We can demonstrate that the Kingdom of God is in fact near when we give - whether that is individually or as a body. It reflects the heart of God and our gratitude to him for what he has given us. We have freely received – let's freely give. In giving, we are blessed:

AC 20: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.' "