

GATEWAY CHURCH NORTHUMBERLAND

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The Challenge of Giving – Joss Bray

We've been looking at the challenges faced by the early church – especially as we see it growing in Acts.

Today we're looking at the challenge of giving.

Often a contentious subject.

It's not a plea to give more to the church!

But as Christians we need to know how and why we give.

Giving can be money – or time – or things – similar principles apply.

We'll look at money in particular today.

Let's look at Acts 2 v 42 on:

⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. ⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

It was just after Pentecost – when the Spirit of God came in power on the church for the first time.

What happened – tongues, bold preaching, challenges to repent, signs and wonders and awe. An exciting time!

But as well as this we also see a real hunger for teaching, eating and meeting together, prayer, giving, sharing, hospitality and praising God.

Then in Acts 4 v 32 we read:

³² All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. ³³ With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all ³⁴ that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales ³⁵ and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.

So, these people who were filled with the Spirit of God were one – in heart relationships and in their thinking – they were in total agreement.

There was no division. They shared everything – heart, mind, and possessions.

This was amazing – an instant community was created that demonstrated the heart of God – fuelled by the Holy Spirit - and one that actually worked!

However, in Acts 5 v1 – we read that things weren't perfect – even at that time of the amazing presence of God:

Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. ²With 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.

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 just to human beings but to God.”

⁵ When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. ⁶ Then some young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him.

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.”

⁹ Peter said to her, “How could you conspire to test the Spirit of the Lord? Listen! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also.”

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.

This doesn't sound too good does it?

It doesn't even sound like the loving God we worship!

So where does that leave us?

Let's go back to first principles:

God gave first – it is his nature – John 3 v16:

¹⁶ For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

And then in Romans 8 v32:

³² He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?

So, the principle is that God is a giving God – he sent his Son, He sent his Holy Spirit – and he gives us everything we need.

In our giving we need to honour God – to be like him – to be obedient.

We see this in the early church as we've read - God inspired people to sell things they had and bring the money to the church leaders.

But why? – and this is important – it was so that the money could be given out as people needed it. The consequence was there were no needy people in the church.

That's an amazing statement that should make us think. We need to make sure that as the church we are good stewards of money and do what we can to distribute it to those who need it.

In Gateway we aim to give away half of what we receive like this – and a lot of the rest goes to meals and transport and so on.

But we also see a really important principle in what happened to Ananias and Sapphira – grim though it is.

When God revealed to Peter that they had lied about bringing all the money – what did Peter say? He didn't say "you should have brought it all – that's the rules!".

He said basically that the money was theirs to do with what they wanted – and the sin was lying to God.

It wasn't about the money – it was about the heart.

The presence of God was so close at that time that this sort of deliberate public lying resulted in instant consequences.

We must remember God is a holy God who hates sin – and sin has consequences – and Ananias and Sapphira suffered those consequences.

Perhaps they wanted to look good in front of people with their significant gift – they wanted people to think highly of them and praise them. It's a lesson for all of us in our attitude to giving and serving in general.

God knows our hearts and if that sort of thing is in there – we need to repent and change.

So, talking of attitude - do you remember a few weeks back when we looked at the challenge of loving one another?

The strapline was “it’s not what you do – it’s the way that you do it”

If we don’t give with the right attitude – honouring God – then it’s pointless – listen to 2 Corinthians 9:

⁷ 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

So, as well as there being no place for giving to promote ourselves in front of others, there is no place for giving out of duty.

We shouldn’t give because the leaders say so - or grudgingly because we’d rather not – but we are each called to decide what to give and to do it cheerfully.

This expresses the love of God in a tangible way – and it also shows something of our heart.

Consider the rich ruler in Luke 18:

¹⁸ A certain ruler asked him, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

¹⁹ “Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good—except God alone. ²⁰ You know the commandments: ‘You shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, honour your father and mother.’^[a]”

²¹ “All these I have kept since I was a boy,” he said.

²² When Jesus heard this, he said to him, “You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

²³ When he heard this, he became very sad, because he was very wealthy. ²⁴ Jesus looked at him and said, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!

²⁵ Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

Wow – Jesus got right to the heart of the matter. He didn’t argue with the man about how well he had kept the commandments – the issue was his heart.

When Jesus said – “one thing you lack” – what did he mean?

I think it was this – the rich ruler’s heart was itself ruled by the love of and reliance on wealth, things and money. He lacked the freedom to follow Jesus – because his heart was elsewhere – when it came down to it.

This is really important for us – where is my heart? Do I lack the trust in Jesus to really follow him by putting him first – rather than the world and the things of the world?

It’s a big challenge for all of us – and it’s a day to day challenge.

I believe that only when we are filled and transformed by the Holy Spirit can we really be free of the love of the things of the world.

I John 2 is very clear:

¹⁵ Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father¹⁵ is not in them. ¹⁶ For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes not from the Father but from the world. ¹⁷ The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever.

There’s something for us to get to grips with this week with God - a bit of homework – “is there anything I love that gets in the way of loving God and following him first”?

Everything else will pass away – it’s just metal plastic wood etc. There is no place for loving things – we can certainly appreciate them and find them useful or even beautiful – but our first love should be for Jesus – and our second love should be for one another.

The widow in Luke 21 knew this:

As Jesus looked up, he saw the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury. ² He also saw a poor widow put in two very small copper coins. ³ “Truly I tell you,” he said, “this poor widow has put in more than all the others. ⁴ All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on.”

It’s not about the amount – it’s about the heart.

God changes hearts – consider Zacchaeus the tax collector – he started to follow Jesus and was so changed that this happened:

Luke 19 v 8

But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, “Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.”

What was Jesus response – was it “actually you need to give everything to the poor” – that’s not good enough...? – no it was this -

“Today salvation has come to this house,”

Now – the question arises then – how much should we give?

As we’ve seen – there doesn’t seem to be a set amount.

In the Old Testament – tithing was the expected giving – a tenth of income and also gifts and offerings on top.

Some people say that is what is applicable now in the church in terms of regular giving.

And it’s not a bad guide – but tithing is not actually mentioned in the NT – but it is mentioned 29 times in the OT – but there may well have been an ongoing tradition – especially amongst Jews who became Christians.

But - as we have discovered – it’s not actually about the amount – it’s about the heart.

Personally - I don’t think there should be a legalistic formula – 1/10 – pre-tax? post tax? after bills? Etc. It doesn’t feel like the grace of God at work if we are thinking like that.

Each one should decide themselves not under compulsion or grudgingly.

It may be more than 10%!

Different people give differently – think of the rich ruler – Jesus told him to sell everything. Zacchaeus gave half his possessions – Jesus was happy with that.

In fact, if the rich ruler had literally given everything away then he would have followed Jesus with no clothes on – it’s the same with the disciples.

In fact, the disciples did not go around naked and people in the early church still had their own houses which the church met in.

If you think about it – if everyone in the church sold everything – then we would all need help from someone else. And they couldn’t give us that help if they had already given everything away – and so on.

But whatever we decide personally to give will-

First of all be a reflection of where we put our trust and love

And secondly, will have an impact on our walk with God as we trust him more – we will see his blessing more.

On top of regular giving – there are offerings – and there were several in the NT – in particular churches supporting each other in times of need.

In Galatians 2 v 10 Paul is clear when talking to other leaders:

¹⁰ All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I had been eager to do all along.

Remembering the poor is an apostolic imperative – it was and should be a core function of a healthy church.

As well as giving regularly and special offerings, let's not forget what also happened in the early church – they shared everything in common – they didn't count their possessions as their own.

Again – this is a mark of a healthy church – how much we share of what we have, including things, hospitality, time and so on – that speaks of God's love to us and us as the family of God.

And just to mention a practical issue – which may be even more controversial than how much to give:

What if we owe money – be it to banks, lenders, friends etc?

Should we consider not paying them back, so we can “give more to God”?

I don't think so - Romans 13 says:

⁷ Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honour, then honour.

We should be paying our debts – keeping repayments up – before we give money away.

If we owe money – then it is in fact not ours to give away!

It does not honour God if we do not honour our financial commitments.

But it is actually honouring God to demonstrate integrity and honesty in our financial affairs

So first make the agreed repayments for the month – then give out of what is left – whatever you decide – be it 1% or 50% - but then it is your money to do with what you decide – not someone else's.

We will find that when we are obedient to God – we will be able to walk in his blessing a whole lot better – and he will definitely supply our needs:

2 Cor 9 is very clear on these principles:

6 Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. 7 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 ⁸ And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. ⁹ As it is written:

“They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor;
their righteousness endures forever.”^[a]

¹⁰ Now 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.

¹¹ You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.

¹² This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord’s people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. ¹³ Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else. ¹⁴ And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you. ¹⁵ Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

This isn’t the “prosperity Gospel” – this is the proper Gospel.

The “prosperity Gospel” basically states “give money to this ministry and God will prosper you financially” – this is a thinly disguised version of this error in 1 Timothy 6:

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.

But God has given freely to us, so we may give freely to others. He promises to supply our needs – we need to trust Him in it.

As Jesus said in Matthew 10v8:

Freely you have received; freely give.

So, what’s the most indescribable gift he has given us – Its Jesus and the good news of salvation – freely given at a huge cost.

This week – let’s thank God for that gift.

Let's also ask him to expose in our hearts the things that are getting in the way of putting him first.

If it is the love of money or things – then this is what God says to us:

Hebrews 13 v 5

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.”^[a]

There's no better promise than that.