

First to the Lord: the bible and giving

Giving in Grace understands giving as being caught up in the overflow of God's love, grace and generosity. This paper explores a little of what the bible has to say about giving and why generosity is a matter of personal discipleship and a core value of congregational life.



The bible is well aware that our giving meets real needs. The Old Testament tithe helped to look after the priest, the widow, the orphan (Deut. 14:22-29). A rich ruler is told to give his wealth to the poor (Mark 10:17-29) and Jesus tells us to do the same (Luke 12:33). Paul made an apostolic commitment to help the poor in the church at Jerusalem. What does it mean, then, for Paul to praise the church in Macedonia for giving themselves, *first to the Lord* (2 Cor. 8:5) before making their financial gift to Jerusalem?

Giving to a need or needing to give?

Christians don't just give to a need, we *need to give*. Why? Because our giving is the overflow of God's gift to us in Jesus: 'you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich' (2 Cor. 8:9). Paul is so sure about this that in two chapters about making a financial gift not once does he use the normal Greek word for 'money' but combinations of 15 other words, the most frequent of which is *charis*, grace. Paul does not tell us about how much money the church in Macedonia gave to Jerusalem but about the grace that was given to them. And that is the heart of giving for Christians.

The challenge to church leaders

So here's the thing. If we see stewardship as simply getting in the money, then giving is about methods, novel and familiar, of parting reluctant givers from their money. Mercifully, leadership and discipleship in the body of Christ is richer than that. Giving is not a tip we offer to God for spiritual services rendered. It is not a tax on church life: pay as you pray. It is not even about the tithe. To give generously is to be caught up in the overflow of God's grace for, when we give, we reflect the nature of God himself. For church leaders the goal of stewardship is not simply to obtain the gift but to nurture the giver. We shall keep coming back to this key point. So what else does the bible say about giving?

Of your own do we give you

Let's start with an important Old Testament story from Deuteronomy 26:1-15. Here a farmer brings the first fruits of his crops to the priest to set before the altar. The land that produces his crops and feeds his herds is given by God (verses 1, 4, 9 and 11). It is owned by God (Psalm 24:1; Lev. 25:23, Hag. 2:8) but *promised and gifted* to his people. That is why each Sunday, as we give our gifts, we say, 'all things come from you and of your own do we give you' (1 Chron. 29:14). And it is a rich land, flowing with milk and honey and our farmer is to 'rejoice in all the good things the Lord your God has given...' (Deut. 26:11; Psalm 104). That is why Paul tells us that God has given stuff for us to enjoy (1 Tim. 6:17).

Remembrance

So giving is one way in which we remember that what we have actually belongs to God and is entrusted to our care. Now part of that





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remembering is the practice of gratitude for what we have. As a lovely French proverb says, gratitude is the heart's memory. And each time we give, we remember that what we keep and all we have is a *gift* from God. The point of the first fruits and of the OT tithe is to remind us of the true owner and giver of all things.

But if giving is to help us remember the Giver, then what we give must be serious, generous and meaningful because we cannot give to God that which costs us nothing (2 Sam. 24:24). There is no place for casual, thoughtless, small-gift giving. Giving that expresses gratitude and reminds us that all we have is a gift from God must, the bible says, be a *priority* for us and a gift in *proportion* to what God has given to us (Deut. 16:17; 1 Cor. 16:2; 2 Cor. 8:7).

Release

We work hard to remember that God is both owner and giver because it is all too easy to forget! Money is a good servant but a terrible master; like salt water it can't satisfy our thirst and will always leave us wanting more. Deuteronomy 8 warns Israel against forgetting God and being proud of heart when they become prosperous. Paul warns against greed and the love of money (Col. 3:5, Eph. 5:3 1 Tim. 6:10) and Jesus says bluntly, 'you cannot serve both God and money' (Matt 6:24). Well-known stories such as the rich fool and his barns (Luke 12:13-21) show how easy and how dangerous it is to be wedded to wealth.

Jesus said, 'for where you treasure is there your heart will be also' (Matt. 6:21). What we do with our money *reveals* our hearts but generous giving can also *release* our hearts from the gravitational pull of wealth. Giving builds resistance to the relentless creep of consumerism while enjoying God's gifts with contentment and gratitude. Generosity is a discipleship decision that refuses to put money at the centre of our lives.

Responsibility

The gift of God creates an obligation to act justly around wealth. Scarcity and poverty are an offence to a God of abundance (Prov. 14:31,17:5; Amos 2:6-8; Mal. 3:4-5). So, for Israel, the law commanded the cancellation of debts, the release of economic slaves, the prohibition of interest, limits on security taken for loans, observing Sabbath rest and Jubilee. Each third year the annual tithe is shared with priest and refugee, the poor and the defenceless. For their part, the prophets thunder against injustice to the poor because these laws were intended to redeem and

restore God's gift of land to all God's people, not just the wealthy few.

Worship and faith

Finally, back in Deuteronomy 26, our farmer makes his gift in the place of worship then speaks of what



God has done for him and for Israel. Giving is more than a personal commitment. Giving is a shared act of worship because we travel together as God's people.ⁱ And giving is fundamentally confessional:

what we give speaks about what has been given to me, to each of us in the grace and the gift of God. It is no accident that, each Sunday, directly on the plate or indirectly through the bank, we make our gifts together in worship as the saving grace of God is celebrated.

Stewards of all

It is often said that Martin Luther believed we needed three conversions: of the heart, head and wallet – and that the last was the test of the reality of the first two conversions. The rich, biblical word 'steward' means that we own nothing but enjoy all; we give generously but also save and spend, budget and borrow responsibly; we have a passion for social justice and concern and care for God's creation. More than meeting needs, generous giving is the hallmark, the litmus test, of the faithfulness and accountability to which each steward is called (2 Cor. 4:2; Luke 16:1-15).

Note

ⁱ Anglican churches express this mutuality in a system of parish share. We might pay, but do we plead, as the Macedonians did, to share in the grace of giving to other churches (2 Cor. 8:1-3)?