

“THINKING ABOUT GIVING”
1 Corinthians 16:1-4; 2 Corinthians 9:6-15

As you will see from the notice sheet and *Vision*, in a couple of weeks' time we are to hold another “Gift Day” – an opportunity to respond to God's faithfulness to us by offering our money to him, particularly in this case to help pay off the last remaining part of the loan on the building development. You'll also be aware, if you've been at recent church meetings or read Stephen Packham's article in *Vision*, that, just like every other organisation, we need to ensure that as a church our income meets our expenditure each month. Not everyone realises that this church is funded by the people who worship here week by week – that's you and I – so we are the ones who are responsible for making the books balance.

Money is not always something we talk about openly, is it? Many people are very secretive about it and we don't like to disclose how much we earn, how much we give away, or how much we spend on certain things. If we come to church in some fancy creation and someone remarks on it, we bluster about trying to excuse the apparent expense by saying we bought it in a sale, or we had a gift token or we bought it on a shopping trip abroad where, of course, everything is so much cheaper! And we certainly don't want anyone to tell us how to use our money, be it double-glazing salesmen, government spokesmen or the minister at church.

I'm not going to tell you how you should be spending your money and, for those of you who have swallowed the myth that churches are always on about money, try and think back to the last time you heard a sermon about it from this pulpit. I had a look back through my sermons and I don't think I've preached on it more than three times in the past sixteen years. But your money and your property are just as much gifts from God as your talents, your time and your energy – given to you to be managed responsibly to the glory of God. You cannot for one moment say that your money has nothing to do with your faith: it cannot be put into some compartment that is beyond God's reach.

Hugh Martin once said, *“If a man's religion does not affect his use of money, that man's religion is vain.”* And I think it was Tony Campolo who said, *“If a person's wallet is not converted, then that person has not been truly converted.”* If your commitment to God is real, if you take being a disciple of Jesus seriously, then it will affect not only your hymnbook but your chequebook too, so we're going to have a brief look at what the New Testament has to say on the subject this morning.

The Bible is full of exhortations to share our resources and to use them for God's work. In fact, there's an awful lot more about the sins associated with the misuse of wealth than there is about the sexual stuff we get so worked up about. The Old Testament is packed with advice – no, commands – about economic justice for all and we could spend a whole series of sermons looking at that alone. It might do all of us good to have a hard look at just how far our society has moved away from the biblical norms given to God's people in past centuries and to see how today's political parties measure up against them. How do we respond to an economy that is built on debt? What should be our response to the huge chunk of our economy which relies on gambling? Where is the biblical warrant for the iniquitous policies of the World Bank?

But today we are going to look into the New Testament, where we read such comments as those in *1 Peter 4:9* (*“Offer hospitality without grumbling”*); *Romans 12:13* (*“Share with God's people who are in need”*); *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”*); *Hebrews 13:5* (*“Keep yourselves free from the love of money and be content with what you have”*). And the descriptions of the early Christian community in *Acts 2:44* and *4:32-37* give us some idea of how it was intended to be worked out in practice.

We're going to focus on the two short passages we read a few moments ago from Paul's letters to the Christians in Corinth. He obviously takes it for granted that God's people are going to give to the work of the kingdom, so he speaks here of the attitudes and practicalities that have to do with our giving. The

passage in *1 Corinthians* deals with the **practicalities**, the passage in *2 Corinthians* deals with the **attitudes**. I don't really think they need too much explanation – indeed, we might end up explaining them *away*! So let's look at them and comment briefly on what they might mean for us today. How should we, as disciples of Jesus, give?

1. REGULARLY

Paul tells us that giving should take place “*on the first day of every week*” (*1 Cor. 16:2*). That was when the Christians met together each week, so it was a good time to sort it out. We should ensure that we give regularly, just as we receive regularly – whether it's our salary, our wages, our pension or our benefits. We shouldn't be left having to fork out as and when we remember it any more than we would expect to be paid as and when the boss remembered it. You may feel it's helpful to give every week (in which case, you might like to think about the weekly envelope scheme – talk to Andrew Grainger about that), or every month or even once a quarter or once a year. You may feel that you can do that most efficiently by getting a standing order at the bank, or you may feel that you want to give every week by putting something in the bag as an act of worship. But regular giving reflects your regular receiving – and also helps the treasurer to plan effectively for the church's budgetary needs.

2. THOUGHTFULLY

The Christians in Corinth were told to “*set aside*” a sum each week and save it up (*1 Cor. 16:2*). This was because Paul was going to visit them and take their money to help alleviate the suffering of their Christian brothers and sisters in famine-hit Jerusalem. But he wanted it to be done with thoughtfulness so that when he did arrive they didn't all have to ferret around in their togas to see what was in the pockets. Think about what you are giving. (That's why we're looking at this today, two weeks before the Gift Day – so you can think and pray about it.)

And think, too, about where you are giving it. This church isn't the only place where God's purposes can be served financially. I would argue quite strongly that this is the main arena in which members of this congregation should be putting their money to work, but there are plenty of other organisations and charities which are deserving of Christian support. Look at what Paul writes in *2 Corinthians 9:7* and give some thought to what you give, so that you don't end up giving God any small change you can find in your pocket on a Sunday morning.

3. PROPORTIONATELY

Give “*in keeping with your income*” (*1 Cor. 16:2*). I imagine most of us ensure that we have enough money for the electricity and gas bills, to pay the television licence and the car insurance. We budget for our payments. So you should be budgeting for God, too. That means that every time your income goes up, so should your giving. If your income goes down, you shouldn't feel guilty that you can't give as much as before. In the Old Testament, God told his people to give a **tithe**, a tenth of their income and to do that before any other demands were made on their resources, so that he got the best. After all, it all came from him in the first place. There was a church where people still gave a strict tithe, but people kept waking up in the night in a cold sweat after dreaming that they had to live on just ten times what they put in the offering!

We may not feel the legalistic application of the tithe is appropriate today – there's been a lot of discussion about that – but we should still give God first call on our resources, I believe: before the leisure items that eat into our income, before the household expenses, before the tax man. But it's between you and God. Pray about it and think about it – and then decide before God what proportion you are going to give and stick to that as far as you are able.

4. **GENEROUSLY**

Paul's words in *2 Corinthians 9:6,7,11* are roughly paraphrased by Francis Bacon as "*Money is like muck: no good except it be spread.*" Don't hold back on your giving to God: be generous as he has been generous to you. God provides for us in abundance. He lavishes his gifts upon us. So that should be reflected in our giving. There are even ways in which the government can help you in that. If you pay income tax, you can "Gift Aid" your money to the church. And then, for every pound you give, the Exchequer gives the church another twenty-odd pence. Not to make use of that is a sad waste of God's resources. If you want to find out more, have a word with Stephen Packham and he'll give you the forms to fill in.

5. **CHEERFULLY**

Paul tells the Corinthians not to give "*reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver*" (*2 Cor. 9:7*). Don't begrudge your offering to God. Give it with thanks, and give it enthusiastically. In other words, give it as you receive it! That's why we refer to it in our services here as "the offering", not "the collection", as a way of signalling that this isn't something we do under compulsion. Some people have tried to make something of the fact that the word translated here as "*cheerful*" is the Greek word at the root of our English word "*hilarious*". That's true, but it didn't have the same connotations then as now – although to see people smiling as the offering is received would be a bonus!

6. **FAITHFULLY**

This fits in to some extent with what Paul wrote in his first letter about giving every week. But notice that Paul talks of it here in the second letter as "*the obedience that accompanies your confession*" (*2 Cor. 9:13*). If you can be faithful in your giving, then that will testify to faithfulness in other areas of your life as well. Billy Graham (again) once said, "*If a person gets his attitude toward money straight, it will help to straighten out almost every other area of his life.*" So don't set yourself unrealistic targets and don't set off with good intentions only to let them lapse after a couple of weeks or months. Be faithful. And pass that faithfulness on to your children as well. When you give them their pocket money, explain that some of it is to be given to God and help them set off on the right footing. I'm very grateful to my dad who, every Saturday, would put on the mantelpiece a line of sixpences (a fairly short line, it has to be said): two for my pocket money and one to go in the offering at Sunday School. In many ways, using a standing order at the bank helps with that regularity, but don't forget to review it every time your income changes.

7. **RESPONSIVELY**

But why do all this? What's the point of giving? Because of what God has already done. Paul writes here of the "*indescribable gift*" (*2 Cor. 9:15*) that God has given us. The older translations have "*unspeakable gift*", which probably brings to mind a number of unwanted Christmas presents we've received from colour blind great-aunts! He means the gift of God's Son, Jesus Christ, the gift of eternal life, the gift of forgiveness – all inextricably bound up in each other and the object of our remembrance in a few moments as we celebrate communion together. God gave us those gifts first of all and what we are doing as we give to God is giving him thanks for what he has first done for us. Our gift is a response to his love and to the totally selfless nature of the gift of Jesus. When we stop to think of just what we have received from God, then there is surely nothing that we can hold back from him.

So, go away and think and pray about what you give to God. He has been doing great things among us here over the past few years and we need to respond to that – both in thankfulness for what he has done and in faith for what is going to happen. If we want this work to continue here, we need to be prepared to get behind it not just with our time and our talents and our prayers, but also with our money. Think about the Gift Day on November 4th, when we hope to have enough to clear our remaining debt and move forward without that distracting us. But think also about what you give week by week, month by month to enable God’s work to be done here in the way that we believe he wants on into the future.

Questions for discussion on next page.

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Questions for discussion

1. Why are we so embarrassed to talk about money?
2. What are the advantages of regular giving? What about the frequency of giving?
3. Is the *"tithing"* still binding? Why/why not? Should we set our tithe before or after all our other outgoings (including tax)? Why/why not?
4. Is it possible to give both sacrificially and cheerfully?
5. What are the implications of this for the money we do not give? How can we use what we keep back for God's glory?