

GOOD NEWS ABOUT GIVING

V Coleman - Eastview Baptist Church 13 November 2016

The pastor of the Christian Fellowship in Dargaville was a colourful fellow, a friend of ours, and when we joined his family for lunch one day, he proudly showed me his new computer. This was the 1980's so I imagine it was a Commodore 64. He was excited about the system he had installed to keep track of his flock of parishioners, most of whom lived on the wrong side of the tracks. Under each name was their job, their family size, their income and the amount of the 10% tithe all members were expected to give. For any who have never heard this word before, here's a definition: *Tithing = the principle of giving one tenth (10%) of one's income to a charitable purpose like a church.* In the last column was how up to date this payment was, which Ray told me was useful when he or one of the elders went to visit those folk. They could challenge them if their giving had got behind, and bless them if it was up to date. I have to say I felt sick. Presbyterians don't demand a literal tithe and they certainly don't tell the pastor what each family has given. Baptists are the same. We look to the New Testament's teaching on giving motivated by generosity and expressed in love.

Today my topic is money. It's about how the good news of Jesus flows into our everyday lives, our families, our income and our giving, and is revealed in worship, love and generosity. I want to begin by showing you these three chairs. Imagine that we are listening in on a conversation between friends. They are talking about their parents' attitude toward money, and the first friend says, *"My mother was afraid of money. She believed money was the root of all evil. She saw her friends becoming obsessed with money, spending too much, and being enslaved by debt. She thought money was a kind of idolatry, that we too easily worship money instead of God."*

The second friend responded, "How weird. I just don't get that. For my parents, money was the evidence of God's blessing. The Bible says it is. When we were struggling financially, they told us if we loved God and served his people, God would bless us with more money."

"Whoo, that's bizarre - how could your parents ignore Jesus saying we can't serve two masters? We can't serve both God and money. There are a whole bunch of verses in the Bible about the danger of money."

"They would never have thought they were serving two masters. They truly believed they were serving God, and they knew that serving God would result in all sorts of blessing, including the blessing of money."

Then the third friend speaks up. "I think my parents had a different view of money again. They saw money as a tool, and tools are neutral, they can be used for good and for ill. My parents had been missionaries who relied on the generosity of Christian givers, and today they still raise money for projects in the islands. They talk about 2 Corinthians 8 where Paul writes about raising money for people in need, and the importance of generosity."

Three perspectives. I wonder which one is right? This friend's family saw money was a snare, an idol, an idea they got from the many biblical passages about the danger of money. The second friend was raised to see money as proof of God's approval, and there are psalms and proverbs that say that. The third friend was taught to see money as a tool to get things done.

The three views are all found in Scripture. Jesus does indeed say that we cannot serve both God and money, and Paul says "the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil." But the Bible also refers to money as a blessing from God, though one that is meant to be shared. And that third perspective, money as a neutral tool, is also there in the Bible. Let's read from 2 Corinthians about the churches of Macedonia, who collected money to help Christians elsewhere and how Paul encouraged the Christians at Corinth to join in that kind of generous giving.

READ 2 Cor 8: 1 – 11 and 2 Cor 9: 6 – 10 (see last page)

This sermon series is about the gospel – the good news - announced by Jesus Christ. It's the conviction that through Christ's life, death and resurrection, men and women can be reconciled to God. That in him a new order, a new kingdom, a new climate of grace can radically change our daily reality. Jono's message last week reminded us that expressing that good news in our lives and sharing it with others is part of our calling as a church. But often our gospel message is narrowed down to a tick on a decision card or a 3 sentence sinner's prayer, which we use to save people from hell without telling them how that saving grace works out in this life. The gospel has been downgraded to a form of 'fire insurance' policy that we buy and then go back to living by the same values and practices that we did before. But the kingdom of God is meant to change and challenge our fallen world. In his book *The Hole in our Gospel*, The President of World Vision, Richard Stearn says when we become involved in people's lives, build relationships, share their sorrows and joys, love generously and care for the most vulnerable in our community, we are living out the good news in a holistic way that has the power to change the world.

I recently heard a useful explanation of how the good news of grace works out in our lives. It comes from John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement. He described our experience of God's grace as like a house with three parts. The first is the front porch that he calls prevenient or initial grace. There God's grace is inviting us, urging us, challenging us to move into the house, but sometimes we spend a long time standing outside deciding whether to accept the invitation. When we do say yes to God and receive Christ as Saviour and Lord, Wesley says we are going through the doorway, which he calls justifying grace. Responding to God's invitation and going through that doorway make us right with God and assures us that our sins are forgiven. Once we're in the house, there are lots of rooms for us to explore. The grace that guides us when we're inside the house, helps us mature in faith and follow the way of Jesus; that's called sanctifying grace. Exploring and deciding about money and generosity are part of finding our way around the house of faith and becoming more like Jesus.

(If you are still on the porch, you are welcome not to give any money today).

When I was a kid, we didn't have much money. I always saw it as a result of my father being a pastor, but Ric says Dad's smoking habit ate up a lot of our income. Each week my parents gave me and each of my siblings sixpence to put in the offering. The amount never changed but I am sure they did increase the amount in their main offering envelope, because my dad was a stickler for careful accounting. When I went away to university, I still put in a coin, I suppose it was a dollar by then, but I had no idea that some people gave a proportion of their income, and that their offering increased each year as their income went up. But these were the times of charismatic renewal and I soon learned that some churches recommended or even required a tithe of 10% every week. I heard 20-minute offering sermons, citing the prophet Malachi and threatening God's curse if the tithe was withheld. That's why I knew what the spreadsheet on Ray's computer was for. In my theological studies though, I had learned about old covenant and new, about law and grace, and that the background of Hebrew tithing means it is not relevant today (here are some extra facts). In fact, Jews today do not tithe! I also learned about the practical realities of a church budget needing everyone to contribute to make sure the minister was paid, the Sunday school kids had curriculum and the power stayed on. By the time Ric and I were earning, we had committed to giving regularly and proportionally – and that 10% isn't bad as a guideline. I doubt that I am the most generous giver in this room, but we do make it a priority to support this church and others, and our missionaries and other charitable causes, every month. I see it as a spiritual discipline that honours God, grows us in grace, meets the needs of others and equips the saints for the work of ministry. I guess having been supported by the gifts of others over my whole childhood and decades of serving in ministry myself, I belong to the 'money as a tool' school of thinking. I know how financial generosity makes it possible for our pastors to have an income, for our church buildings to be maintained, and for our ministries and administration to be resourced. Because money is a tool I know that generous givers make all sorts of mission activity possible. Money is a tool, and we can use it to make things happen that we believe in and care about. That's part of being a responsible member of the community. It's part of being generous like Jesus was generous. *"You know the generous grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, who though he was rich, for our sakes became poor."* Money is a tool and how we use it is a spiritual issue. That's what our scripture is about.

Paul had started a church in Corinth in Greece around 50 CE. He spent 18 months there, so was aware that it was blessed with gifted leaders and vital Spirit-led worship. But there were problems as well. They didn't always live out their gospel values, or follow through on promises, especially in relation to

money. By comparison, the extremely poor folk in the Macedonian church further north were generous givers. In our Scripture, Paul writes to challenge the Corinthians about rounding out their worship and teaching with love and generosity.

But he is careful to say that financial generosity is not a matter of compulsion or regulation. Verse 8 explicitly says that Paul is not laying down an eleventh commandment. *I am not commanding you to do this – you are not to give reluctantly or in response to pressure. Use your own free will to give in proportion to what you have. Whatever the amount it is acceptable if you give it cheerfully and eagerly.* He is saying intentional giving is important; in another letter he says “*On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income*”. But the good news of Jesus is that we are called to give willingly, thankfully, cheerfully. God does not send us a bill, or keep a spreadsheet of our donations. There are no measurable external criteria – the only standards are love and gratitude. The house we enter by grace is fragrant with generosity.

In a moment I want to go back to our three chairs, and talk about some financial realities in our faith community here at Eastview. But first let me lay down some assumptions:

1. That everything belongs to God, and that we are called to be stewards, kaitiaki, of the resources with which he has provided us. Many of our offering prayers speak of this.
2. That looking after our family is our first priority – the Bible has some harsh words for people who don't (see 1 Tim 5: 8). Mortgages, school fees and grocery bills have to be paid.
3. And that time as well as money is a gift we need to use generously, we see that in the parable of the talents, but you'll have to make the switch in your head to apply my sermon to the clock as well as the wallet. For today I want to talk about money.

Three Chairs.

The Blessing Chair - **Generous giving is an expression of worship.** When we invite Christ to be Saviour and Lord, we are adopting a different world view (Jono). The view that we are resident aliens in this world, that our allegiance lies with another king, an alternative regime. Worship is about declaring that aloud each and every week and about inviting the Spirit to make Christ's rule more and more real in our lives. That's why we always include an offering in our worship service. These days most of us give by AP from our bank account, so in a way we don't need to pass round that offering bag. In fact, we have talked about having a basket in the middle of the aisle, which is what some other churches do. And we are going to get pushpay. But there's a mental shift when we take time to pass the bag around. It reminds us that all our resources, our houses, our cars, our holidays, our ballet lessons, our vanilla lattes, our share portfolios come from our wonderful Creator God, and that our gifts to support the ministries at Eastview and beyond are symbols of our responsibility as managers of his resources. Expressing an attitude of gratitude in our offerings - this is the upward look.

You will be glorifying God through your generous gifts. Your generosity will prove that you are obedient to the Good News of Christ.

The Danger Chair - **Generous giving is an expression of discipleship.** It reflects the character of God, the great giver. If we are to become all he means us to be, we will develop a giving spirit, a generous attitude. To be like Jesus is not just to stop committing sins like lying, cheating, gossiping or wrong thoughts. To be like Jesus is to seek to do the Father's will, to serve God not money. We talked about this in our Five Habits series, the fourth habit of “learning Christ” is one that forms our character as generous, hospitable, Spirit-led, authentic followers of Jesus. Generous giving is an acknowledgment of the real danger of greedy consumption - and a commitment to fight the socially-transmitted disease of affluenza. Have you heard of that? A blend of influenza/affluence, it signifies “**a painful, contagious condition where debt, anxiety, and waste results from the dogged pursuit of More**”. God's answer to this malady is a call to his people to trust him more deeply and share more generously. An Auckland church has as one of its core values “giving not hoarding” - that's the real meaning of trusting God and following Christ. Systematic, proportional generous giving reflects our faith in God's provision and transforms us into the image of Christ.

The Tool Chair: **Generous giving is an expression of partnership in the gospel.** Resourcing our own and other ministries so the good news of Jesus can be shared in myriad ways. This view is especially for Christians like us who are privileged in global terms. There are some wonderful examples of business people who believe in using their resources for good; recently some of us saw Bill Hybels interview Melinda Gates about how her spirituality influences her towards generosity. But research shows that in face of increasing wealth and prosperity, giving has been going down. We are making more money than ever but average giving among committed Christians is down - around 2.5% per person, compared with 3.3.% in the Depression. Yet our faith tells us that the world is in bad shape and we have a part to play on making it a better place. Our money is a tool. Our generosity is a channel of grace. This is the outward look.

Let's bring this home to the mission of Eastview – *To Know Christ and share his love with others through his presence and renewal in our lives together.* Several times in the book of Acts we read about particular circumstances of need where leaders called upon the generosity of Christians. Over recent months the Oversight Group and the Treasurer have spent many hours drafting our budget for 2017. It is our deep conviction that God is calling us to a new stage in leadership that should fit us well for the future. To expand pastoral staffing as well as keeping the important investments we already have in children, teens and families will be a stretch. A big stretch. Members can hear and respond to the detailed proposals next Sunday night. But generosity is going to be the key. We have over seventy wonderfully committed individual and families who give systematically to our mission and ministry here at Eastview. Leaving aside the outliers at the ends of the bell curve, they give on average around \$3000 a year or \$60.00 a week. The leadership will be casting a vision to increase those generous offerings by 20% in the prayerful confidence that additional resources will help our church to grow. I though I'd flag that to you now so you can pray about your role as partners in the gospel. One generous philanthropist said "**Giving is a spiritual act. It is a belief in the future, that the future can be good.**"

To sum up - Generosity is sowing a seed that over time will result in a good harvest. It relieves needs, restore faith and promotes thanksgiving, it is a spiritual practice that forms our character and builds kingdom partnership that can change the world. Money is a blessing – and it is also a danger. Most of all it is a tool that God uses in our lives and in our church and in our world.

READING - Now I want you to know, dear brothers and sisters, what God in his kindness has done through the churches in Macedonia. ² They are being tested by many troubles, and they are very poor. But they are also filled with abundant joy, which has overflowed in rich generosity.

³ For I can testify that they gave not only what they could afford, but far more. And they did it of their own free will. ⁴ They begged us again and again for the privilege of sharing in the gift for the believers in Jerusalem. ⁵ They even did more than we had hoped, for their first action was to give themselves to the Lord and to us, just as God wanted them to do.

⁶ So we have urged Titus, who encouraged your giving in the first place, to return to you and encourage you to finish this ministry of giving. ⁷ Since you excel in so many ways—in your faith, your gifted speakers, your knowledge, your enthusiasm, and your love from us—I want you to excel also in this gracious act of giving.

⁸ I am not commanding you to do this. But I am testing how genuine your love is by comparing it with the eagerness of the other churches.

⁹ You know the generous grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty he could make you rich.

¹⁰ Here is my advice: It would be good for you to finish what you started... Give in proportion to what you have. ¹² Whatever you give is acceptable if you give it eagerly.

⁶ Remember this—a farmer who plants only a few seeds will get a small crop. But the one who plants generously will get a generous crop. ⁷ You must each decide in your heart how much to give. And don't give reluctantly or in response to pressure. "For God loves a person who gives cheerfully." ⁸ And God will generously provide all you need...and plenty left over to share with others, a great harvest of generosity in you.