

Pledge Sunday 2021 2 Corinthians 9:6-15: Giving for growth

Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

Being on the receiving end of a gift is almost always a life-changing thing. Unless we're the kind of person who is forever dropping hints about what they would like to be given, the gifts we receive usually arrive unbidden and, like tennis balls lobbed into our end of the court, put the onus on us to decide how we will play them, what we will do by way of response. Gifts always ask something of us.

Many of you will know the story behind *Les Miserables*, in which the hero, Jean Valjean, breaks out of prison and is taken in for the night by a kindly bishop, whose silver Valjean proceeds to steal, ruthlessly abusing the hospitality he has been shown. In a remarkable scene, the authorities are called and the bishop is asked if these are his possessions. To which he replies, "They are indeed. But, my friend, when I gave them to you, you forgot the candlesticks..." The rest of the story chronicles the attempts of Valjean to come to terms with the gift he has been given.

The Bible invites each of us – rich or poor, good or bad - to see ourselves as those on the receiving end of what St Paul calls an 'indescribable gift': the gift of God's own life given for us. This is where the Christian life begins. And scripture invites us to live our lives in the light of this gift and let it gradually transform the way in which we see everything.

And, as you know, the Bible's word for undeserved, unexpected and life-changing gifts is *grace*, and grace is presented to us as the very foundation of life, such that St Paul can write that we are 'saved by grace'.

Certainly when it comes to thinking about our money and our charitable giving, as Paul does in our Epistle reading, grace is at the heart of his message. Paul's reason for writing 2 Corinthians is to encourage the church in Corinth to complete and send off a collection they were making for the struggling Christians in Jerusalem. And his words, which are reprinted on your giving leaflet today, are full of good and godly sense.

There are three main points I want to draw from this - and the first is this:

1) Don't worship money, Paul teaches, but use money as worship.

The background to everything Paul writes is thanksgiving to God. His letter is very different to the usual charity appeal, which stresses the poverty of those who need the money. Instead, he focuses on giving as worship: **read v11b-12**. God is glorified by our generosity and this atmosphere of praise makes it a very *positive, happy* passage. **Read v7** (same word for *hilarious* in English....). Giving is something we should be *glad* to do; it praises God. *Last week's talent auction was a lovely example of this...*

Money and money worries so easily become our master rather than our servant; so easily our lives and communities become centred around money. Giving money away breaks its hold over our lives; it reminds money who is boss and turns it into a way of serving God.

So that's the first point: *don't worship money but use money as worship. And the second is this:*

2) Money belongs to God, and He will provide

Read vv8-10

The Bible's understanding of money is not that it is ours until we decide to give it to God, but that it comes from God in the first place. If I have £100 in the bank and I give away 10, it is not that the £90 left is mine and the £10 becomes his. Scripture would say all that we have is his and we demonstrate this fact by giving some of it away. 'All things come from you and of your own do we give you'.

When we begin to see God's name on the account before our own; see him as the provider, it becomes easier to depend on him, to let him guide what we do with our money. **And God is able**, writes Paul... **read v8**. As we considered a couple of weeks ago, each of us is desperately afraid of losing what we have, but Paul stresses that God is able to provide for all our needs. And when we trust him to do that, he helps us to use what we have for good.

And, writes Paul, **v11**, we will be enriched by God, not *as a reward* for giving, but *so that we can* give. (This is what some of the worst TV evangelists get wrong - you know the sort of thing - if you send us 10 dollars, you'll receive 30 back, or whatever. That's not the point.)

As Paul goes on to say, any harvest we reap in return for what we sow enables us to give more generously, so that it can be shared with others... which is our last point:

3) Giving grows!

If someone defrauds you of money, it's not only you that loses out, it's everyone else who was going to benefit from that money – it gets passed on down the line. In these times of recession, you will know better than I how this works in business: one client takes a little longer to pay their bills and soon everyone does; one firm stops doing advance work on a job for free and soon everyone does. Individual actions with money set up cycles and cultures that spread. Paul describes giving as working the same way:

Read vv12-14.

Giving sets up not a vicious circle, but a virtuous circle, so that it becomes much more than the meeting of a particular need. God is glorified; the giver is enriched and those who receive are blessed. The Bible is packed full of examples of where small acts of grace and generosity are transformed into something much more - take the feeding of the 5,000, as an obvious example. Small gifts of generosity can be immensely powerful.

Speaking about money is not easy in church, but like most of the things we struggle to talk about, it is absolutely vital that we try to: not only practically, because unless we give financially to our church it simply cannot run, but also spiritually – for the way in which we handle money is central to our spiritual welfare.

For all kinds of reasons, many of us will not be able to give as much as we might want to – but far more important than the amount of our gift is the way of life our giving reflects.

So let us live as those on the receiving end of an indescribable gift and, in doing so, find ourselves enriched in every way.

Briefing

Today we are thinking explicitly about our financial giving to St Mary's. Here are some important background points:

- 1) If you are a guest here this morning, this isn't something we do every week, and it is particularly to regular members of the church that we are addressing today's presentation!
- 2) The Bible teaches that this be done cheerfully, generously and proportionally, deciding what part of our income is set aside for the church.
- 3) Not all of our charitable giving will be for St Mary's, and, for all sorts of reasons, many of us cannot give as much money as we would like to the church. Far more important than the amount of our donation is the attitude & readiness with which we give.
- 4) In encouraging giving to St Mary's, I believe it is vital that St Mary's reflects this same generosity in what we give away as a church. That's why I am working with the PCC to increase our giving over the next few years to 10% of what we receive.
- 5) Finally, there are many ways in which we can respond generously to God: gifts of time and prayer can be even more valuable to us than money, so you might like to consider tithing your time – giving an hour a week to helping the church, for example. And if you need some examples of what you could do to help, I'll be only too pleased to speak with you!