

THE GIFT OF GIVING

Why is money so important to God?

We are starting a new series today on the Gift of Giving and our first topic is 'Why are money and possessions so important to God?' I hope you have all had an opportunity by now to have read Ian's open letter about the finances of the church. Or in particular, the sacrificial giving and actions by this vibrant family. It makes encouraging reading, but it would be only too easy to feel self-congratulatory. Or somehow ease back a gear. The point Ian makes is that this year ahead is going to be equally challenging, and maybe we will need to get out of the boat again as a church.

So, money – why is it so important to God? Is this really the sort of topic we should be spending a whole series talking about? Aren't money and possessions a private matter, something practical and secular that we can deal with outside of church?

Well here are some amazing statistics: there are twice as many verses in the Bible devoted to money and possessions than to faith and prayer combined. Jesus talked more about money than both heaven and hell.

Why? This enigma deepens when we look at how closely Jesus linked money to salvation itself.

Remember the story of Zacchaeus; a wonderfully repentant tax collector. He underwent a dramatic conversion. His response to Jesus' challenge was to say that he would give half his money to the poor and pay back four times what he had cheated from other people. And in response Jesus didn't just say – yes that's a good idea, now lets talk about the spiritual issues in your life. He said: "*Today salvation has come to this house*". This is quite amazing. Jesus judged the reality of this man's salvation based upon his eagerness to part with his money – to restore relationships with others, which were broken by his former attitude to money.

Zacchaeus is not an isolated case. John the Baptist heralded the way for Jesus. Luke

chapter 3 tells us about his encounter with the crowds. If you're following in the Bible it's verse 10. When confronted with the challenge of repentance he tells his listeners: the man with two tunics is to share with someone who has none, the person with food is to do the same, tax collectors were told to stop collecting too much – in other words be fair in their finances and soldiers were to stop extorting money, stop accusing people falsely and to be content with their pay! In all four cases the conclusive evidence of spiritual change was an altered perspective on the handling of money and possessions.

In Mark 12 we read the story of the widow who put two tiny copper coins in the temple offering box. We don't know exactly how much they were worth but it was probably less than a penny. This was all she had. If we were her financial advisers we might say that was a bit imprudent, maybe she should be a bit more balanced in her thinking. But Jesus gave her an unqualified commendation for her choice! Saying: *I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They gave out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty, put in everything – all she had to live on.* Jesus enshrined her example in the Word of God for all believers, then and now, to emulate her faith, commitment and sacrificial generosity.

For the widow, or the soldiers, tax collectors and people listening to John the Baptist, or for Zacchaeus, liquidating and dispersing assets accumulated over a lifetime was no more natural to them as it would be to us. And that's the whole point. Conversion and filling with the Holy Spirit were supernatural experiences that produced supernatural responses. While there was still the private ownership of property in the first century church, the joyful giving and sharing of property became the new 'norm' of supernatural living. If a first century Christian were to visit us today and gauged our spiritual condition by our attitudes to money and possessions, I wonder what conclusions they would come up with?

One writer has put it like this: *'Money is the litmus test of our true character. It is an index of our spiritual life. Our stewardship of money tells a deep and consequential story. It forms our biography. In a sense, how we relate to money and possessions is the story of our lives'*.

In the account of the poor widow, Mark wrote, *“Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury”*. It doesn't say Jesus happened to notice, but he deliberately watched to observe what people were giving. Jesus was interested enough in who was giving what to make an immediate object lesson to the disciples about the true nature of trusting God as demonstrated in sacrificial financial giving.

Has God stopped having an interest in how we use our money?

As we go about our lives every day we interact with money and possessions all the time. How do you and I feel about our possessions?

What thoughts go on in your mind as you contemplate them? Delight, disappointment, insecurity, contentment, greed, dissatisfaction, anxiety, peace of mind, guilt, anger, envy, excitement, gratitude, trust, regret.

So, how does God view money and possessions, and the effort and work that goes into gaining them? Are they unhelpful and wrong, or should we strive after them? Let's look briefly at some of the scriptures and discover that actually it isn't that straightforward!

Proverbs 6:6-11.

This proverb seems to be extolling the virtue of hard work.

The non-stop ant is a role model and the sluggard is the one to avoid.

How about Proverbs 27:23-27

Again this scripture is advising on the importance of your knowing the condition of your business and planning production well so it provides food and nourishment for the family.

Hard work and enterprise seem to be important in a godly lifestyle. What about Jesus' teaching in the 'sermon on the mount'?

Matt 6:25-34

Is this teaching us the opposite thing? Is Jesus telling his hearers not to work hard and provide for their families – rather to trust God for everything?

It's easy sometimes to get the impression that scripture contradicts itself – and of course, it doesn't. The underlying counsel of the Old and the New Testament is that we should be diligent and honest and hardworking in our labours.

Paul writing to Timothy says something along similar lines:

1Tim 6:8 *If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.* Strong stuff! So how does that fit in with Jesus' commands? In a word – attitude!

Jesus doesn't say to anybody "don't work, don't earn, don't own". It's about attitude – don't worry! What did he say? *'Don't worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than clothes? ... your heavenly Father knows that you need them.'* Who is Jesus talking to and what is it all about? The Kingdom of God. And when it comes to money and possessions Jesus is saying it's about attitude!

God cares about our hearts and God cares about relationships. Jesus concludes that section by saying *'seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and all these things will be added to you as well'*.

Does that mean that God is going to send them by DHL? You know, put them on the Divine Heavenly Lorry. No, I don't think so! He was looking straight at the people who would provide for their needs. Farmers, shepherds, traders, carpenters, musicians, tailors. But the attitude they needed to have was an attitude that defined community and the relationships within it. The Kingdom of God was not to be a community that went without. It was to be a community that provided for it's needs: honestly and fairly; enough but not too much; with love and mutual concern not greed and self-gratification; sharing and not hoarding.

God cared about their hearts and God cared about their relationships. God cares about our hearts and God cares about our relationships.

Have a look in the newspapers. Are we in a mess in our world and our economy at the moment? What's at the root of it? Well, I know there are many theories and

arguments about the cause of the economic straights we are in, and I don't propose to address these – except to give one example. It's topical and controversial, and you can come to your own opinion, but I wonder what attitude is shown by a top leader of a massive financial institution who steers it into near collapse and world record breaking losses and then slips into retirement on a £600k a year early retirement pension? It's about attitude - God cares about our hearts and God cares about our relationships. This must be at the centre of why money and possessions are important to God.

It gives God joy to bless us with 'every spiritual blessing'. We learned that when studied Ephesians, didn't we? And Ian made the point very clearly: every spiritual blessing includes spiritual AND the physical, or the sacred and the secular. He blesses us with forgiveness and grace; with money and possessions. Then he wants to know what we are going to do with them.

How will we use them to build community? How will they define our relationship with each other and our relationship with God.

We looked briefly at Paul's letter to Timothy just now, let's read a bit more 1 Tim 6:6-10. What's the problem here – it's not money, it's the love of money. What does the love of money do – it's the root of all kinds of evil - Paul mentions a few of them:

- falling into temptation – perhaps the temptation to steal or defraud
- people getting trapped – maybe trapped by unmanageable debt
- foolish harmful desires – money can fuel excessive behaviour, obsessions, desires for what we shouldn't have, desires for what we can't afford
- it plunges men (women) into ruin and destruction
- for some it means veering from the faith, piercing themselves with many grieves. – You know, veering doesn't usually follow a clear decision, it can be the culmination many small choices; death by a thousand cuts.

Why are money and possessions so important to God? Because God cares about our hearts - God cares about relationships. Money and possessions play a big part in defining our relationships in community with God.

So is a solution to despise money? The early church went through a very interesting

period, perhaps a unique period – although it could be repeated! Acts 2:42-47. In one seamless paragraph, Luke has described a church where the sacred and the secular were all mixed together: prayer, teaching, fellowship, possessions, goods, giving to those in need, meeting in the temple courts in homes, breaking bread, praising, showing dramatic church growth. They had money and possessions but clearly didn't have problems with either because of their godly attitude.

Or we could take a negative example to make the point. Judas was the 'money man' amongst the disciples. Why did Jesus pick him for that job? The Bible doesn't actually tell us but I expect it was because he was good at it. Good book-keeper, financially astute, probably made a good job of it at the start. Then his attitude to the money began to change. He was the one who got cross with Jesus for allowing Mary to pour expensive perfume on his feet. The gospel writer records a sobering fact about Judas' changed attitude to money in that incident. John 12:6 *He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put in it.*

Petty theft – what did it end up as? 30 pieces of silver, greed, deception, betrayal, death, ignominy.

The Bible doesn't only describe bad attitudes to money and possessions – of course not! Perhaps the most balanced example of a good attitude is Paul's. He knew wealth and he knew poverty. Moreover, he knew his dependence was on God. At one point in his ministry he relied heavily on the community relationship he had built up with the churches he worked with. Do you write your thank-you letters for the gifts you receive at Christmas birthdays? Maybe it's an e-mail these days! Paul wrote a thank-you letter to the Philippian church after they sent him a gift. Let's read about his attitude to money and possessions:

Phil. 4:10-14. The secret Paul had learned was about his attitude to money – contentment. He had learned to be content when he was well off. He had learned to be content when he was in need. It wasn't the money or possessions that made him content – it was his reliance on God's strength.

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hearts God cares about relationships. Money possessions play a big part in defining our relationships in community with God.

Of all subjects, this is one the most difficult to preach on, because it hits home. Every word I say is directed at myself first. We would all do well to review our own attitudes to money possessions.

Perhaps we can start by asking ourselves how we do on these questions:

- Is my money my own business, or is it God's business?
- Do my possessions belong to me, or do they belong to God?
- Do I see money as a secular matter, or is it a spiritual matter?
- Does money have little to do with my spiritual life, or is it an indicator of my spiritual life?
- Would God be displeased with my financial life, or would God be pleased with my financial life?

As we continue in worship, let's give God an open invitation to do his work in our lives.

Preached at Crawley Baptist Church on 1st March 2009 by Colin Guest.