

Money, Stewardship & Giving : For Such A Time As This

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[0 : 00] This morning, I don't know what you feel about this, I am ending the series of messages on giving.

And I feel a little self-conscious about that because I got a text from somebody earlier in the week who comes to church saying, are you banging on about giving again?

And the answer is yes, in a way. And I hope you will bear with me. And if you're a visitor to this church or you're not a member here, please just kind of take the principles I'm talking about.

We're not trying to wring every last buck out of everybody who walks through the door of this church, mostly. So, yeah, I...

And I remembered that I read R.T. Kendall's book on tithing. I don't actually think that tithing is a New Testament principle.

[1 : 06] I think it's... The principle for people in the New Testament is surely generosity, sacrificial generosity, not simply tithing.

And tithing is, you know, it's a good kind of guideline. It's not a bad place to kind of aim for. Some of you might be able to achieve better than that. But one of the things he says in what is a very good book on generous giving, and I think this may be why Clive and Russ planned it this way, is that there is something about giving that will unlock something in you spiritually that nothing else will unlock.

Let me say that again, because it's so counterintuitive, isn't it, to say something like that. But once you get giving for the right reasons in your heart, it will unlock things in you spiritually that nothing else will unlock as well.

That was R.T. Kendall's thought, and it's my thought. And I want to start with a true story, which illustrates in a way where I want to get us when we start to look at the scripture.

I met this German hotel owner, and he owns hotels in America, and in America, you may or may not know this, but it is, that tipping is a big deal out there, right?

[2 : 40] So you are supposed to, when you vacate your hotel room, leave some dollars for your chambermaid who's cleaned the room for, I'd rather like that, I don't have a problem with that, I think it's a good thing.

And generally the kind of guy price would be, you know, say you've been there two or three nights, you'd leave \$20, somebody generous might leave \$50, somebody mean might not leave anything. So this Hispanic chambermaid went into a room where this guy had been, and she finds \$100 left on the little table in the room.

And her thought is, and it's your thought, that's a mistake. You know, no idiot would leave \$100 in a room. So she takes it to her supervisor, who takes it to the floor manager of the hotel, and hands it in.

The floor manager contacts the guest and says to the guest, I'm sorry to bother you, but we've noticed that you left \$100 in your room.

[3 : 46] Did you? And before he could say, did you mean that, the guy said, I did what? He said, you left \$100 in the room. He said, how do you know that? He said, the chambermaid picked it up and handed it in.

He said, she did what? He said, the chambermaid picked up the \$100 bill, assumed you've made a mistake, and she brought it in.

There's a little silence on the phone. The guy said, you give that \$100 back to her. He said, and give me a name, and I'll send her another \$100, because I want to bless that kind of honesty.

See, when you get that kind of generosity, which is in response to the honesty of another, incidentally, the thing that pleased the hotel owner was, that he said that one of their core values as a hotel chain was honesty.

And it's kind of rewarding if you run a company, when you discover that your employees actually get the values that you're on about. So let's turn to 2 Corinthians chapter 9.

[4 : 59] I don't know if we can have that up on the screen or not. That would be helpful. And I want to focus on one verse today, and I think you might have seen this coming, where Paul writes, whoever sows sparingly will reap sparingly.

It's a very simple little quip, isn't it? Whoever sows sparingly will reap sparingly.

German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer said this. He said, every man takes the limits of his own vision for the limits of the world.

Let me say that again. Every man takes the limits of his own vision for the limits of the world. Paul says, along the same theme, I think, you go and sow sparingly.

Don't come crying when you reap sparingly. What we know is, there's a kind of general rule in life, though it's generally true rather than exclusively true, that inputs affect outputs.

[6 : 20] What you put into your life or what somebody else puts into your life will dictate some of the outputs in your life. Right now, nearly every day in one of the newspapers, you will find in one of the special, many special supplements that they do day by day, an article about artificial intelligence.

Be very careful not to say artificial insemination at that point. Artificial intelligence. And what we know is, and this now is becoming a grey area, but what we always used to say, computers are as good as the programs you put into them.

But the next generation of AI devices will be able to think for themselves. And so, you know, there's some ethical anxiety around that.

You probably read in the newspaper last week that an algorithm has found a new strain of drugs that will combat severe infections that antibiotics today won't touch.

I mean, imagine that. It's an algorithm. You can't go shake hands with it. You can't give it a kiss on the cheek and say thank you. And it's done something that human beings fail to do.

[7 : 42] Perhaps we're right to be anxious. Perhaps we're not. I don't know. Paul, of course, in talking about sowing sparingly here, is talking about giving.

But if you were to turn over just a few pages in your Bible, if you have one, to Galatians chapter 6, we read these words, where Paul is talking about sparse sowing and sparse reaping being related as a kind of universal principle.

He says, Don't be deceived. God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that sinful nature, will reap destruction.

The one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit, will reap eternal life. You start to see that this sowing and reaping has massive application for our lives today, has massive application throughout the centuries to all human life.

You need to understand this, that what you put into life, or if you're a parent, what you put into the lives of others, is going to have some outputs in those lives.

[9 : 04] I think back to some of those little children on the streets of Guatemala. I think of the girls of 12 years old who don't reach that age without ending up with a baby.

Not fathered by, you know, a 15-year-old, loud, but by a 50-year-old man who wants no responsibility, nothing.

You think you can put that into the life of another and it's not going to have ramifications. You think that you can go on living a sinful life, doing it your way, as Frank Sinatra said, and that is not going to have impact on other people.

Don't be deceived, says Paul in Galatians. God is not to be mocked. See, Paul had this idea that if we're claiming the privilege of being a child of God, but we're not living like a child of God, then effectively, we're mocking God.

And I don't know about you, I kind of think that must be serious, that we would live like that. So Paul says, whoever sows sparingly will reap sparingly.

[10 : 27] But Paul here is using another very important principle to make this point. Again, it just illustrates why this principle is important, not just in the realm of giving, but in the realm of our Christian walk with God.

What Paul argues here is that God's relentless grace provokes reckless generosity in us. Let me say that again. God's relentless grace provokes reckless generosity in God if we really get that relentless grace.

2 Corinthians chapter 9, Paul says this, God is able to make, this is verse 8, God is able to make all grace abound to you so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.

I'm minded to say that I think the most misunderstood principle of the Christian faith, probably represented here by, dare I say, potentially two-thirds of you, is that you sit in church week by week, you sing the hymns, you say the prayers, you shout amen, and we move on.

[11 : 51] But actually, do we really understand grace? Do we really understand God's love for us even though we don't deserve it?

I mean, imagine that. That's not just somebody who fancies you. This is God. This is the God who looks at you as you are and still manages to love you, but loves you too much to leave you as you are.

And look, a little litmus test for you. I've asked you to apply this litmus test to your life before. If you think that blessing with God is to do with earning it, you don't understand grace.

Grace, as, terrible thing when you get old, isn't it? Your names go out of your, out of your head. Dallas Willard said, grace means the end of earning, but it doesn't mean the end of effort. See, you're sitting here thinking, you know, what I do is going to affect, you know, no.

[13 : 11] God's grace is that he loves you even though you don't deserve it. And where does he show that grace primarily? He shows it on the cross of Calvary.

Back in the days of the Old Testament, in the book of Isaiah, chapter 53. I mean, this is truly amazing. I mean, writing 650 years, 700 years before Jesus appeared on planet Earth.

This prophet prophesies about the person who would be the Messiah. I mean, imagine it. Watch this. He's talking about the person who will come and rescue his people in the future.

The first thing he says is, you're not going to be that impressed with his physical looks. This is not Brad Pitt. He said, he was despised and rejected by men.

A man of sorrows and familiar with suffering, like one from whom men hide their faces. He was despised and we esteemed him not. You know, you're kind of worried, don't you?

[14 : 24] I mean, Jesus, you know, in the minds of this man's, I mean, you've seen pictures of Jesus in Sunday school, haven't you? He looks like the lead singer of Deep Purple or something like that.

I don't know if he did look like that. You know, would he pass the Hollywood screen test? I don't know. But then Isaiah goes on, he says, surely he took, took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows.

And yet we still considered him stricken by God, smitten by him and afflicted. For he was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. Okay, let me just graphically show you what I think Isaiah is prophesying here.

Imagine at the moment that this is your life and this is God. And I'm putting him up there, not because I think God is, you know, up there as such, but bear with me.

Right? What Isaiah is telling us is that it's our sins that separates us from God. Now, imagine this book is the book of the record of all the sins in my life.

[15 : 31] Right? I mean, this would be volume one, honestly. Right? It's a big collection. I mean, forget the Encyclopedia Britannica. Okay? So what Isaiah is saying is this sin lies on my life and it's between me and God.

It separates me from God. God, that's terrible. And maybe we don't take that seriously enough, but even if we do, it's terrible unless there is a way past it.

A way that my sin might be taken away. And what, what grace is, a God who in the person of Jesus comes down to earth.

And Isaiah says, on him, the burden of my sin is laid. So I'm free to have a relationship with God. Someone say, hallelujah. Some of you are thinking, I never knew that.

Don't say that. But, see, that's where grace begins. It begins on the cross that Isaiah saw would be the place where my iniquity would be laid upon him.

[16 : 44] That's why Paul talks about a new righteousness. The old righteousness under the Jewish law was, if you keep all the law or you do the best you can, you might make it into heaven.

No, says Paul, there's a new righteousness. A righteousness based on grace. A righteousness based not on what I do, but on what God in Jesus Christ has done.

How do I access that? Well, that's a great question, isn't it? Someone say, you're going to tell me I've got to give generously and then I can access it.

Some of you say, am I going to have to live a neurotic life, wondering whether or not I've done enough? Enough good things to kind of cancel out the stuff that's not so good in my life.

No. The Bible says, we access this grace through faith. Ephesians chapter 2, verses 8 and 9. If you don't believe me, read them when you get home. It is by grace, you have been saved.

[17 : 49] Not by works, i.e. not by your own effort. So that none of you can boast. I remember we had a great preacher in the church when I was a young preacher.

So funny. When I was a curate, I read all this guy's books. They're really good books. And I'd be, I'd preach a sermon, you know, I'd be allowed out about once a month to preach a sermon when I was a curate.

And you know, you do the thing, you stand at the back of the church and you're saying goodbye to everybody. Everybody would say to me, your sermon sounds just like David Watson. I'm like, no wonder, you know, it's about two thirds of his book in that last effort.

See, it's not about what we do. It's about what God has done. And when David Watson died, he had written a book called, I Know Where I'm Going.

And the, his obituary in the Daily Telegraph was truly shocking. It was written by a person I won't name, but is generally, you know, is a very, he claims to be a Christian, but he's, you know, he's like a mean-spirited Christian.

[19 : 05] He said, what about this arrogant man who wrote the book, I Know Where I'm Going? What kind of arrogance is that? Now, somebody wrote a letter in, a man called John Stott.

John Stott said, you just don't get it, do you? I mean, I'm paraphrasing, obviously. You don't get it. David Watson knows where he's going, not on the basis of his effort, but on the basis of what God has done.

Listen, friends, you want to access this, it is by grace through? Faith. You can have a change of heart today. You can come to the one who sent his son to a cross so that the sinful stuff in our lives, I don't meet many sinless people, do you?

So that stuff can be dealt with and dealt with for eternity. You sit there and say, well, I've got too many questions about that and I'm sure you do and I'm sure some of the questions you've got in life are real and genuine questions.

The reason why I say sow sparingly, reap sparingly, is that it's generally true, but then there are some things where other people have sowed sparingly into our lives and we've reaped the harvest of that.

[20 : 42] I'm thinking about people who've been abused. I'm thinking about people who've been treated cruelly and consistently. Watch this.

It's not what you do. It's what God in Jesus Christ has done. And in response to that, Paul, in this particular scripture, is saying, if you get grace, if you get how reckless the grace of God is, that he would forgive a sinner like you, then to turn around and be mean-spirited would surely be an inappropriate response.

But it's not just about generosity with money. It's about generosity with our time, with our attitudes. I've found that. You know, getting old is a real challenge.

Because I've found that, you know, I know why people like me are generally thought of as grumpy old men. Because somehow your attitudes, you know, I have to own up to that.

God wants me to be generous in my attitudes when I'm 70, not just when I'm 17. And of course, yes, be generous with our money.

[22 : 13] And the Bible says that it would be great if we could be cheerful givers. I love that.

And I've learned that, I think, in my own life. There's a lot of stuff I'm still learning, but I have learned that. It gives me joy to give stuff away. I know that's challenging if you're a hoarder.

But I've learned that it gives me joy. And I remember in my funny little old church in Slough, we had a woman come to Christ there, Chris her name was, and she had a husband.

And his idea of life was just to lie in bed all day. He had a bad back and he didn't do any work. And usually, if he did get work, it like, you know, two weeks later, he'd give it up because his back was too bad.

He was a joiner, kind of made staircases and that kind of thing. The net result of his, they ran up a lot of debt.

[23 : 19] I mean, it was like four and a half thousand pounds, which doesn't sound like a lot today, but I'm going back, well, 40 years almost.

And Chris shared this with the home group that we were in. And it was beside herself, really, with anxiety.

And then, another single woman in our home group emptied her life savings and gave it to Chris cheerfully.

Now, my view, you know, I was, honestly, I was like, whoa, you know, be careful with this one. You know, you make sure somebody's put a plug in the bottom of the bath before you start pouring water in it.

She's like, Mike, that's not the point. The point is, I've been forgiven and I need to respond with everything I've got.

[24 : 26] And if that's what it takes to help Chris through this crisis, that's what helps. And then what Paul says here is, when this happens, when this kind of generosity unravels quickly, it's, it just encourages people.

When some people so generously, the rest of us are encouraged. Don't give because you think you will get more back. There is a strand of that in the Bible.

You know, honour me in this as the Lord and I will honour you. But I don't think our motive should be, I'll give generously because I'm, you know, I'm hoping that God's going to give me back. Don't believe what they call prosperity teachers in church.

If you come to God, you're going to get filthy rich, right? I mean, you'd be amazed you wouldn't get killed in the crush, wouldn't you, if that was a, a true message.

Generosity brings wealth of a more holistic kind. When you learn to be generous, you will discover a richness in your life that doesn't just involve money.

[25 : 35] Verse 11, Paul says, you will be made rich in every way. Imagine that. When you unlock some generosity in your heart, you will become rich in every way.

So, Lord, we're at the end of our course. And I just want to read this to you to close. This was in our daily readings yesterday.

It was written by a guy, I can never remember his name, Gilly Bode, I think, something like that. Anyway, he says this, I think this is really cool. He says, my six-year-old went to his first football lesson and came back saying, Daddy, I've learnt to play football now, I needn't have any more lessons.

And Gilly Bode goes on, he thought he'd arrived because he could connect his foot to the ball. He didn't know there was a little more to it than that. He needed to go a whole lot deeper. Then he says this, some people can be like that with God as well.

A.W. Tozer, the great Bible teacher and evangelist, warns us of being among the number of those who think they've got it nailed. Whereas, and this is quoting directly A.W. Tozer, the Apostle Paul was a seeker and a finder and a seeker still.

[27 : 05] They seek and find and seek no more. After accepting Christ, they tend to substitute logic for life and doctrine for experience. For them, the truth becomes a veil to hide the face of God.

For Paul, it was a door into his very presence. Paul's spirit was that of the loving explorer. He was a prospector among the hills of God, searching for the gold of personal, spiritual acquaintance.

grace. It may well be that this is your moment where God is speaking in your ear where you turn around to him and say, I need that grace that your word speaks of.

I need that forgiveness forgiveness of which your word speaks. And I need to learn what does it mean in my situation to sow generously.

Not just with my money, but with my attitudes. Not just with my money, but with my time. And next week, when I should be far, far away, Clive and Russ are going to wind this thing up totally by asking you to respond.

[28 : 34] I don't want you to respond out of some bound and duty and service. I really don't. I want it to be because the word of grace has touched your heart.

I want it to be because you've decided that one football lesson isn't enough to know the whole skill of the game. And you are going to have to come back to that throne of grace time and time and time again.

When that happens, you will find something will be unlocked in you. And who knows, you, you might even become a cheerful giver.
amen. In the name of our gracious and generous God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the people who agreed said together, amen.
Amen.