

Generosity

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[0 : 00] Matthew chapter 19 and verse 16, a man came up to Jesus and asked, Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?

There's a story told about the amazing Apollos, who was a circus act and was a strong man. He could bend iron bars, he could lift great weights above his head, but the climax of his act was that he would soak a Union Jack in water and then he would wring it out and he would challenge people in the audience to come forward and see if any of them could wring any more drops out of the Union Jack.

Nobody could ever do this until one day the circus was in full swing and Apollos did his act and issued his challenge and this little old man came back from the back of the grandstand, came down to the front, took the cloth off him and wrung out some drops.

Everybody was astounded. The price for this challenge was £100. So at the end of the circus, Apollos met with the little old man, said to him, where on earth do you, what gym do you go to?

[1 : 24] Where on earth did you train to do that? He said, oh, it's simple. I was the church treasurer for years. Why is it that we find talking about giving so difficult?

And I suppose it's because we're quite private people. Quite rightly, the Bible encourages, don't let your right hand know what your left hand's doing, but in our culture at least, it's not the dumb thing to wander up to somebody and ask them what they earn, for instance.

It's kind of private information. And giving is difficult because it really tests what we're like on the inside.

There are some people in every congregation, as a matter of fact, who the Bible would say has the gift of giving. You can read about them in Romans chapter 12 when Paul lists the gifts of the Spirit. They are not all of you, but all of you do have a responsibility for giving. Those with a special gift give liberally. I have a friend who has earned a lot of money as a hedge fund manager.

[2 : 44] And he gives away millions of his pounds of his money every year. He's the kind of guy you would say ought to be rich because he gets generosity.

But let me ask you, friend, do you get generosity? There's such a huge pressure, isn't there, in our culture that if you earn a big salary, you've got to live a lifestyle that matches that big salary because then you'll look cool.

And here, in our narrative this morning, is this man who we know was very wealthy.

He comes to Jesus with a very fundamental existential question. What must I do to inherit eternal life?

And of course, this was before the cross of Calvary, before the resurrection, before Jesus withdrew to heaven and sent the Holy Spirit upon his people.

[3 : 54] So Jesus gives the standard rabbinic answer. Why do you ask me what is good? There is only one who is good. If you want to enter life, then obey the commandments.

Which ones? The man answered. I imagine he was hoping that Jesus might leave a few out at that point. Jesus replied, Do not murder.

Do not commit adultery. Do not steal. Do not give false testimony. Honor your father and mother. Blah, blah, blah. And the man says, Well, I've kept all these.

What's the problem? Jesus nails the problem straight away. If you want to be perfect, go sell your possessions and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven.

Then come follow me. Verse 22, I think, is one of the most amazing verses in the Bible. Because it says that when the young man heard this, he went away sad because he had great wealth.

[5 : 01] You would think, would you not, he would go away mad. And you imagine, somebody you met for the first time asks you to recite the commandments. You've done pretty well on the

commandments and this is the one thing you've got to do.

Give everything away. Am I the only person in church that would be a little mad if somebody said that to me? Apparently so.

And it kind of quashes the myth that everybody who came to Jesus went away happy-clappy, doesn't it? This man went away sad. So you're sitting there thinking to yourself, so have I got to go away and sell everything and give my money to the poor?

Well, this was specific advice to this specific man. Clearly, this was his problem. He had a strain, like most of us do, of idolatry in his heart.

And his idol was his money and his possessions. And the only way that he could be free from that idolatry was to get rid of it.

[6 : 21] Groucho Marx said that when people say it's not the money, it's the spirit of the thing, it's the money.

And I think he spoke into a reality there. Let me ask you a question. How much time do you think, do you spend thinking about what you might spend as opposed to what you might give?

Let me ask you that again. How much time do you spend thinking about what you could spend rather than what you could give away? Occasionally, our hearts are stimulated, aren't they, when we see a need and it kind of connects with us and we do something generous.

That's great. Please don't stop. But do you think God has some generous days and then some days off when he's a little more mean-spirited?

I don't see God like that at all. The God who loves you gave, gave his only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.

[7 : 39] What must I do to inherit eternal life? Great question. And part of the reason why it's a great question is that many of us are nearly good.

We're nearly good. There are lots of things about your lives. I know some of you. I know you're basically good people. But you know and I know there probably is something in your heart that is not so good.

Might be some malice. Might be some meanness. Might be some lust. Might be whatever. We're nearly good. And this man was nearly good but there was one thing that got between him and God, his idol, and that was his money and possessions.

And Jesus said to him, go, give it all away. And the man goes home sad. Well, before I stood up before you this morning, I prayed that nobody would go home mad.

Although that has happened to me. I was once preaching on giving at a church in Chesham and in the middle, about ten minutes into my message, this guy stands up. He had noisy shoes on.

[8 : 50] He clunks out of the church down the middle, slammed the door so hard. I swear to God, I saw a crack appear in the corner of the building and a month later the building was condemned.

I said, seriously. And the vicar came to me at the end of the service and said, what shall I do? I hadn't got a clue what to say to him as a matter of fact, but being a minister, I couldn't keep my mouth shut.

I thought I've got to say something, you know. So I said, oh, don't worry about it. You know, sometimes the Holy Spirit provokes people to anger. Vicar phoned me on Tuesday he said, that man.

I said, what? He said, he came around to see me. I said, what? Did he hit you? He said, no, no, no. He wrote a check for ten percent of his income and handed it to me.

I went to a women's meeting in the same church about two days later to speak. Women's meeting, please note, this guy's on the front row.

[9 : 59] He's like a groupie. Listen to me, I am certainly not intending to make you mad.

What I'm intending to do is to inspire you to fresh generosity. We're nearly good, but there probably is something that you're hanging on to. May not be your money in your case.

That means you need to let go. Do we all have to give as Christians? The broad answer to that is yes.

Why? Because it displays to God that we get his generosity. The sin of idolatry lingers on strongly in our culture.

And as I've said to you before, the problem with idolatry today is, back in the old days when the Bible talked about idolatry, it was like people who had statues and images of steel and metal in their homes that they worship.

[11:07] Today's idolatry seems much more subtle to me. Because good things can become an idol in our lives. Anything that gets between you and between God is an idol.

Giving is a spiritual responsibility. You're not going to quibble with me that praying is a spiritual responsibility even though you really struggle with it.

You're not going to quibble with me if you're a Christian believer that worshipping with the people of God isn't a spiritual. You're not going to say that's not right. But by your actions you will demonstrate whether you get that giving is as much a spiritual responsibility as praying as worshipping.

And if you don't get that, I mean, this is the thing about generosity is that apart from those few people who've got the gift of giving, generosity needs to be taught.

It doesn't come natural to many of you. I know that. I've been in a pub with some of you. Giving is a spiritual responsibility.

[12:38] And our little clip before talked about tithing. That was a practice that was alive and well in the Old Testament when people would bring 10% of their produce and hand it over to the priest.

In other words, 10% of the work of their hands went over to maintain the priesthood and to pay for the cost of the cult around the tabernacle in the early days and the temple in latter days.

I would prefer myself rather than talk about tithing, which seems to me to be an obligation of the law to talk about sacrificial giving.

I think we should be prepared to give till it hurts us a little bit. I think we should be thinking a lot of the time, is there anything I could give up in my life so I could give that money away either to the local church or to a worthy cause.

Giving is a spiritual responsibility too. Why is giving so important? Have you ever heard this said or have you ever said it yourself that it's not the money, it's what you do with it?

[14:04] That's a very common middle class explanation for a middle class lifestyle. not the money, it's what you do with it. Well Jesus never taught that.

Jesus taught that money was, do you remember that funny word he used, mammon? And mammon is a rival God. Mammon can take a hold of you, money can take a hold of you.

I think in our culture there are a lot more people who are owned by their possessions than own their possessions and their wealth. How much time do you think spending thinking about what you could spend rather than what you could give away?

Is there anything in your life you could give up in order that you could give a little more generously? And Jesus didn't teach it's not the money, it's what you do.

What he taught was that if you get your attitude to mammon wrong, it will take a hold of you. I've heard people say in our culture, and I know what they mean, people will do anything for money.

[15:25] I mean, you can spot that pretty well, can't you, amongst the criminal classes? What they would do for money, exploit children. send women and young men into the sex industry for money.

Money has got a grip on us, and Jesus suggests that it's mammon, and the only way we can break the grip of money upon us is to give it away generously.

That's a tough message, I get that. what can I give, or what shall I spend?

That's what we need to think about, what can I give, not just about what I could spend. The third thing is, we do need to give sacrificially. I went to the national prayer breakfast in the House of Commons, and Bill and Melissa Gates were the speakers.

And you may or may not know this, but Bill Gates is a pretty rich guy, and he's given away billions of his money. I mean, you know, we're like sad for him, because he's only got a billion or so left.

[16:50] In 2018, there were only 60 odd cases of polio worldwide reported. Why? Because Bill Gates has given his money into that course.

I have no idea whether this guy's a Christian, but he gets generosity. Somebody said to him, why do you do this? Bill Gates said this, he said, it's the work of God.

It's the work of God to give. He then said, a Labour MP stood up and said to him, so how many billionaires have you persuaded to give it all away?

He said, he chatted with his wife for a second, he said, we think 67. Labour MP said, well, that's not many. Bill Gates said, well, it's a start.

I don't know what giving sacrificially would look like for you. And I don't know about this. Many of us feel these days that those of us who are older and years that we got to help our kids and all that.

[18:07] I don't know whether I should include the help I give to my kids, which is pretty paltry, I would think. I don't know whether I should include that in my giving. Let's look it after my own, isn't it?

As Clive told you, Ante and I just came back from Guatemala, I mean, you want to see poverty, take a trip. You want to see depravity, take a trip there.

Kids as young as three and four sold into the sex industry. it's difficult to walk by that kind of thing. So, it's a call to give sacrificially. You know, one of the first sermons I heard was from a well-known guy in Bristol at Pippin J Church.

He was the vicar there for years and led the church into renewal in the 1960s. Malcolm Widdicombe was his name, probably more well known as his sister. Anne Widdicombe.

[19:18] And one of the things he said was, I was never quite sure about this ultimately, although I was massively impressed by his message. But he turned to the book of Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament, and Malachi has a kind of, you know, meltdown with the people of God, saying, you've been keeping back your tithes, you've been robbing God, is the language that he used.

And then Malachi speaks the word of God to them. God says to them, test me in this. In other words, you want to find out how generous I am, why don't you try being a little more generous and do what the law says, and give my tithe.

He says, I will open the storehouse of heaven upon you, and pour out the riches of heaven. Some of you are sitting there saying, well, I'll take the money, thanks.

Test me in this. I don't want to make you go home feeling, you know, if you're not giving what you could, that you're robbing God or something like that. I don't want you to feel bad about this. I want you to try and be inspired to be more generous.

And we shouldn't be more generous so God will bless us, but a lot of people have found that being generous means that God does bless you. I had the meanest grandmother on the planet.

[20:43] She used to give me like ten shillings for my birthday. And one day I was, Anthony and I worked at the kind of sister community of Liabi together before we got married.

Our earnings there were three pounds fifty a week. And we used to get paid on a fortnightly basis. So you get a five pound note and two, do you remember one pound notes? All the millennials look completely perplexed at this point.

You get one five pound note, two one pound notes, and one day I had been paid and I was going to go downtown after the service, so I got a fiver in my pocket and the collection plate came round.

You know, and it was a plate, it wasn't a bag where you can put your hand in and flick the side like you put a load of money in it or anything like that. So I'm oh what do I do, what do I do? So I put the fiver in, looked heaven would pray that the storehouse of heaven would open up on me.

Right? I was so fed up, like I can't, this is, what was I, you know, why, I go to the board where they used to pin your post when it came through and there's a letter from my granny.

[22:01] And I opened it, there's a ten pound note in it. I mean, you know what, she, I mean, I don't know what she was thinking, you know, maybe she was under the weather or something, I don't know, but listen to me, God wants to bless you, he's not going to make that conditional on what you do, but actually if you show God that you want to bless him, that's a cool thing, isn't it?

Test me in this, says the Lord. So listen, just let me close by dealing with some very good and common questions that people have at the end of a message like this.

First of one, do I have to give all my money to the church? Clive says yes. No, no, no, I'm joking.

Look, broadly the answer is no, except they do remember that the tithe was given for the maintenance of the clergy of the time and the cult, the costs of the tabernacle, the costs of the temple.

So I think you have to bear that in mind and then on top of that of course what Jews would do was give free will offerings. You know somebody stands up here, says the team going to Uganda, we need to take this stuff out with us, here's the rough cost of it, can anybody you know, and then what happens is we get this out.

[23:38] Right, I love this thing, I don't know if you can see this down the back, but when, this is a machine that you can give directly, I've got to be careful what I press here as a matter of fact. You can give directly with this and then Clive, right, I love this, when the collection comes up he gets hold of this and sticks it in the basket and holds it up.

We're into modern religion here. We would get that out, free will offering, we give some extra to help somebody who's doing a project in Uganda or wherever.

And that's a good thing, and Jews would liberally do that, on top of the tithe that they gave. So the answer to the question should I give it all to the churches, no you don't have to, but bear in mind running this church costs some money and it's helpful if you can contribute to that.

Second question is, hang on, I pay my taxes, isn't that enough? No. No. At the time of Jesus, believe me, you would rather pay tax and 2020 to the revenue in the UK than pay taxes to the occupying Roman forces.

Not only that, but we know that guys like Zacchaeus would not only exact what the Romans wanted, but then would add 10% for his own back pocket. That didn't negate for the Jews their need to pay their tithe or to give sacrificially.

[25 : 19] Third thing is, should I give from my net salary or from my gross salary? Answer, I would start with your net salary and maybe build up to your gross salary.

I went to a very strict church when I was first converted to Christianity. I mean, there wasn't much we were allowed to do, but we were allowed to give. And the guy there taught tithing as a kind of obligation of the law.

I don't agree with that, but it started me on a good footing from the very earliest days of my Christian life. It had gone before I even thought about what I could spend my salary on.

What if I'm already in debt? I want to say a sensitive word to you. Because honestly, you really should work at paying off the debt before you start thinking about giving a lot of money away and getting yourself worse in debt.

And I am sure that if you are in debt and you're desperate, then there are people here who you could confidentially talk to and be able to help you and find your way out of that debt in a way that you can manage and then you can start to be generous to others.

[26 : 45] And the fifth question, oh my goodness, we used to be in this kind of middle class parish, I should say that was after I'd been in Slough, in this middle class parish and I preached a message, I used to preach every January to all our congregations the message about giving.

And I preached it and the next thing is I get a phone call from a man who I don't know. He said, you know my wife, he said her name. I said, oh yeah, I do know her, yeah.

He said, she's just signed over 10% of my salary to your church. I'm like, what?

He said, she doesn't work, she just signed 10% of my salary over to your church. I'm like, thank you very much. Look, let me say, if you are a spouse and you are not an earner, before you start giving away your earning spouse's money, I should have a conversation with him or her.

Is that fair enough? Oh yeah. Oh yeah. So, what must I do to inherit eternal life? This has nothing to do with what you give.

[28 : 17] This is entirely about what God has given to you. His Son on a cross, so that you'll sins can be forgiven.

The nearly not good bit of you can be forgiven. And you can be set free. And as the Bible teaches, you can receive the gift, please note, the gift of eternal life.

Some of you are sitting there saying, well is it like life forever, like life now? No. It's a completely different order of existence.

The Bible says you're even going to get a new body. I know that will be a source of relief to many of you. Getting into heaven in the light of the cross is not about what you give.

it's about what God has given to you and for you. And that is why it's important to show him that we have generous hearts.

[29 : 34] I'm going to end with a little couplet that Mr. Bubbers of the Church Pastoral Aid Society taught me many years ago. It goes like this. What?

Giving again I asked in dismay. Must I keep giving and giving all way? Oh no, said the angel whose gaze pierced me through.

Just stop when the Saviour stops giving to you. Let us pray. Lord, thank you very much that you are such an amazingly generous God.

Lord, our hearts skip a beat when we think that you would send your son to deal with those parts of our lives that we don't like and we're ashamed of.

To put it bluntly, our sin. And Lord, I pray that this morning that amazing act of history, God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have

everlasting life.

[30 : 52] Lord, I pray that your generosity might at the beginning of this new year kindle some fresh generosity within us. Lord, help us to know the joy of giving as opposed to a mean-spirited heart.

Lord, that this world might become a bigger and better place for all human flourishing. And we pray these things in Jesus' name and the people who agreed said together.

Amen. Amen.