

The Sacrifice of Generosity

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Date: 23 November 2003

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[0 : 00] You may like to have open the short little passage in Luke 21 that was read for us on page 856 in the Black Bibles in the pews.

And let's pray. Our God, we thank you that you speak to us so clearly in the words of the Scriptures. And as we come to these words, we pray that you'll write them in our hearts so that we may believe them and do them for the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And we pray in his name. Amen. Alfred Felton was a celebrity giver. You may have read about him in The Age yesterday.

Alfred Felton died almost 100 years ago in January 1904. He was one of the early settlers in Melbourne in the early 1850s and he made a fortune as a merchant and as a manufacturer.

And when he died, he left in his will, he was a single man without family, he left £380,000 worth over \$40 million today to be divided between art and charity for children and women.

[1 : 15] And it's because of his bequest that the National Gallery of Victoria, which is about to reopen in St Kilda Road, has so many fine works of art, paintings and sculptures and etchings and so on, worth now well over, apparently, a billion dollars that have come from his bequest.

Well, there are many celebrity givers. He's one from 100 years ago or more. But there are plenty that we read about and know about from our newspapers. Pat Rafter is a celebrity giver.

Very wealthy, making millions on the tennis circuit and in sponsorship and advertisements. When he won the US Open in 1998, he donated \$300,000 to the Starlight Foundation and then later set up the Pat Rafter Cherish the Children Fund.

Kerry Packer, one of Australia's wealthiest men, when he took ill, if you remember, a few years ago, as a result of the treatment that he received, he donated a huge amount of money for improved medical and paramedical and ambulance facilities.

Steve Waugh, and again, a very wealthy sportsperson who gives money to set up and help provide for orphanages in India.

[2 : 35] Even Michael Jackson, notorious in the news this week, is in some respects a celebrity giver, although it's hard to know whether he's still wealthy or not. And there are prominent philanthropists, of course, not just sports people.

A friend of mine took seriously ill at the beginning of this year and in Jerusalem was taken to hospital and there he said to me, after he recovered from a near-death illness, he's never been more grateful for the list of names on the corridors of the hospital in Jerusalem saying who had given and how much they'd given to help establish and provide for the Hadassah hospital there. All these generous people who are particularly wealthy, often celebrities, well-known, and well-known for giving large amounts of money. And there's nothing wrong with such generosity, of course.

It often attracts great kudos to such people in our society. People think highly of Pat Rafter because not only was he a good tennis player but he's given away a lot of money for charity.

He's still fairly wealthy, I'm sure, like most of these celebrity givers are. They still live fairly comfortably. And it's those sorts of people that Jesus observes at the beginning of this passage in Luke 21.

[3 : 54] Jesus is in the precincts of the temple in Jerusalem and there, in the court of the women or the treasury court, as it was sometimes called, there were 13 repositories for giving.

Trumpet shaped, apparently, and each of them would be given to a specific aspect of temple life, the sacrificial system in Jerusalem. And Jesus observed there rich people coming and making their offerings into these repositories in the treasury court of the Jerusalem temple.

It may be that they were doing so with some pomp and show. In the immediate paragraph before this, at the end of chapter 20, Jesus refers to those who love to walk around in long robes and be greeted with respect in the marketplace and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. That is, the Jewish leaders and perhaps the wealthy people who put on a show of their piety. And in that context, quite possibly, these rich people who come to put their gifts into the treasury make a bit of a show about it.

Maybe not quite a song and dance, but it's obvious that they're making perhaps large gifts into the treasury offering plates, so to speak, in the Jerusalem temple of Jesus' day.

[5 : 14] And that offering was for the provision of the temple, the sacrificial system for the upkeep of the temple buildings as well as for the provision of the priests who operated there.

It reminds us, I guess, that in both Old and New Testaments, all the way through the Bible, it's the obligation of the people of God to give towards and sustain the ministry of the gospel of God in its various forms in the Old Testament and then in the New Testament in the support of Christian church and ministry and mission as well.

But we can't help but think that as Jesus observes these rich people giving their offerings, that he's less than delighted with what he sees. not just because perhaps there's a bit of a show about it, but for other reasons as well.

At the end of the previous chapter, the influential and perhaps wealthy people are commented upon in those verses 46 and 47. They devour widows' houses. They are greedy.

And he says at the end of that chapter, they'll receive the greater condemnation. And so in the light of the greed of the influential and the rich who love to parade their piety, Jesus, as he sees these people offering their gifts in the temple treasury, is probably less than pleased.

[6 : 30] Maybe pleased that there are substantial gifts being given, but displeased with the way in which such gifts are given. Maybe we see here people who are like that rich young ruler we saw last week, leader of the synagogue or the Sanhedrin, one of the very sorts of people that are talked about in those verses at the end of chapter 20, clinging to his wealth, all too reluctant to give it away.

Maybe giving away some, and we might say a large sum, but still living comfortably and holding fast to the bulk of what he's got. Reluctance to give all to the poor as we saw last week.

And the contrast is made because Jesus then sees in verse 2 a poor widow. Literally the word is an impoverished widow. Somebody at the extreme end of the poverty or the socioeconomic scale.

Not just a poor person, but a very poor person. A poor widow, which means that she owns no land, probably has no regular income, is reliant upon friends or families or neighbours or the generosity of others.

No social welfare benefit system in Jesus' day for such people. So she has no general income to support her. Very impoverished.

[7 : 53] And she comes and places in the treasury plate or bowl two copper coins, the smallest coins, apparently worth, in today's terms, less than an ascent, an Australian cent.

Very meagre offering indeed from this impoverished woman. It would be a fraction of a day's wage. It would be scarcely enough for a meal. And she has placed that in the collection bowl.

And it seems the way it's written that there's no fanfare about her doing that. She has made no ostentatious show of what she's given.

She's just simply given as she's gone to worship or make a sacrifice or most likely to say her prayers in the temple precincts. Jesus then comments to his disciples about what he's observed. These two people, two groups of people, so to speak, who've given. He says to his disciples and fairly important words, he says, truly I tell you, that is, it's not just a, you know, by the way comment.

[8 : 57] He says, this is an important thing. Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance. But she, out of her poverty, has put in all she had to live on.

Literally, he's saying, he's implicitly commending this woman for her act of giving. And implicitly, I think, showing his displeasure at the giving of the wealthy.

Now what is Jesus teaching here? Two things he's not teaching. He is not commending giving just a tiny little bit, a couple of little coins, a mite, as the old translation would say.

Because sometimes Christians get it into their head that Jesus commends this woman for giving a mite, so therefore it's okay for us today to put into the collection plate just a tiny little bit, a fraction

of a cent or some modern equivalent.

Well, that couldn't be further from the truth. Jesus is not in any way commending or praising those who give just a tiny, stingy amount for the sake of the gospel and the ministry of the gospel of God. [10:11] Our might, I'm sure in most cases, would be worth much more than we currently give. The second thing Jesus is not teaching is that it's okay to give what's on your heart.

Now sometimes you hear that in Christian circles that you give what seems to be right for you, what is somehow on your heart to give. Well, there's no reference to any of that here.

It's true that God looks on our heart. It's true that our heart ought to be right with God. It's true that in a sense our heart ought to be parallel with what we give but it is also true that the scriptures teach very, very often that our heart is deceitful.

Our heart misleads us and so if we're going to be stingy people, it's our heart that is stingy first before our hip pocket is stingy. So we must be very careful not to fall for the trap of thinking I'll give what's on my heart because unless we've taken deliberate measures to address our heart then our heart is probably telling us don't give very much.

Be stingy. But it'll deceive us because it'll pretend that we're actually giving generously when in fact our giving is stingy and mean. Our hearts are all too quick to fool us.

[11:31] So be careful if you think I'll give what's on my heart because probably that means that we're not being generous. So what is Jesus teaching here about this woman compared to these rich people?

A couple of things. He's firstly teaching us that generosity is an expression of trusting God. You see generosity is not the amount that we give.

Those rich people would have given much more than two little coins. They probably wanted people to see that they were giving substantially just like the celebrity givers of our day. They want people to know how much they're giving.

They like the applause if you like of our society what generous and great people layer but they still live very comfortably on the substantial part of their wealth or abundance.

Generosity is not so much about the amount that is given so much as the amount that is left behind because generosity is about trusting God for provision and so if what we give is perhaps big in dollar terms but leaves us still substantially comfortable, well off and financially secure then we're not actually giving generously as Jesus is commending in this little incident at the beginning of Luke 21 because then we are relying still upon our possessions, our wealth, our income, our financial position.

[13:04] That's what we're trusting in. That's what we're relying upon for tomorrow and the next day but what Jesus commends about this woman is that she's given all that she's got therefore she's having to trust that God will provide.

She has no expectation of social security benefit or financial security at all. She's entrusting herself to the provisions of God not knowing where that will come from next whereas the rich people are still able to rely upon their own wealth, be financially secure.

That's what they trust in even though they may well have given substantial amounts of money. It's the even more substantial bit that's left behind that shows where real trust lies and this is the issue that we saw last week as well with the rich young ruler who comes to Jesus and asks what must I do for eternal life and Jesus said to him sell all your goods, give it to the poor and follow me and he was sad reluctant to do that because he was a very wealthy man that is his trust, his idol, his God was his wealth, his possessions.

So generosity, real generosity is trusting God not our wealth and so to the extent that we're generous it shows us to what extent wealth is our idol or God is our God.

The rich people gave from their abundance. They had plenty. They probably didn't even notice the bit that they'd given away even if in human terms it was a large amount but the widow gave all she had clearly trusting that God would provide.

[14:44] Now that distinction, that practice of the woman is actually taught in a sense more explicitly in the Old Testament where the instructions for giving tithes and the first animal of your flock or first thing of your herd or whatever was in order to train the people of God to trust God, to fear the Lord as it's expressed in Deuteronomy 14.

That is, your giving was to be so substantial and generous that it would force you back on God and trusting God to provide for your needs.

So just like last week we saw the man who was struggling with the idolatry of wealth and relying upon and trusting in his possessions, here the aspect of generosity will expose the same idolatry if it's there.

If we're not generous it's probably because we're trusting our wealth for our security and our future rather than trusting in the provisions of God. You see so often our giving is constrained by our lack of faith.

We say well I can't actually give because I'm just a student or I can't give because I've got a family to provide for or I can't give because I've got a mortgage or I can't give because I'm on a fixed income and interest rates are low and things like that.

[16:01] Now to some extent those statements may well be true but to another extent they are exposing our reliance upon our wealth, our finances for our security rather than relying upon God for our future and our security.

So often they're faithless statements and Jesus is teaching here by his observation of this poor woman compared to the rich people that giving is an expression of trust in God and that's what he commends.

So giving that doesn't force us to trust God, giving that still means we rely upon our wealth and our possessions, our financial security is not generous at all and may actually be faithless.

the other thing that Jesus is teaching here is that generosity is sacrifice. Generosity costs. It's easy enough to turn up at church and out of our pocket whatever is sort of left over from the week so to speak and go in the collection plate.

It may be big notes, maybe a few coins but that's hardly likely to be generosity. Generosity is sacrifice. So if we are to be generous we need to work out what are we sacrificing, what are we giving up in order to give or if we're just giving out of the abundance of our wallet then we're not actually giving up anything, it's just surplus to requirements so we can give it a lot of money but it may not actually still be generous.

[17:38] True Christian giving is sacrificial giving. It gives up in order to give. It is costly giving and it ought to cost us to give to God.

All of this raises great questions for each one of us I think about how do we give because if our giving is to be sacrificial we need to actually think, budget, plan and be deliberate to work out what we give up in order to give.

It won't happen naturally because our sinful natures and our deceived heart will lead us to be meaner and stingier than we ought to be because wealth is such a strong snare of sin and idolatry in our society and for us individually.

So what do we give up in order to give? Maybe that you've never even thought of that. Maybe that your giving is just, might look to you to be generous but it doesn't really cost you anything.

You can maintain all the comforts and still give what you give. I think the challenge for us, each of us, is to think, plan, pray, be deliberate about our giving.

[18:53] Be prepared to give up things to give because how much God has given up for us in sending the Lord Jesus Christ. It's easy each year in many respects to give a greater amount because of inflation and the increase in wages and so on.

It's easy to add a little bit each year but perhaps the challenge is to see what more can we give up to give for God. Can we increase the percentage of what we give, not just the dollar value of what we give?

Because all too often I suspect that we increase the dollar value but it never keeps up with inflation so over the years we actually give less and less in real terms for many of us. Unless we actually think and analyse, plan, budget, be deliberate about the issue, then our wallets will end up more closed because our heart will deceive us and we'll be stingier and meaner and just give out of our abundance rather than giving that is sacrificial.

So my encouragement to myself as well as to each one of us is to think more carefully, plan or budget for the year that's about to start in a month or so.

Plan to be more generous than currently, not just giving an increased dollar amount for the service of God but also giving a greater percentage. And by that I mean not just our regular giving in church plate, though I certainly include that but our giving for gospel causes, for missions and ministries.

[20:24] If you're like me you get dozens of letters every month requesting money for this or that or whatever, all good causes, whether it's Christian work for social welfare or the Christian cause of mission or evangelism or the provision of Bibles or whatever it is, they're an abundance, a plethora

of Christian organisations and needs.

But if the people of God gave sacrificially as we ought, then it would transform the operations of churches and mission agencies around the world. You may have heard this sort of joke come story about giving.

There was a pig and a hen and they were arguing amongst themselves about which of them was the most generous in providing for breakfast. The hen boasted that she gave each day a beautiful egg.

And the pig boasted that he provided the bacon to go with the egg. The hen boasted that the egg was most precious of all. But the pig rightly commented, you can keep laying eggs but when I give the bacon it's all I've got.

And there's a good comment I think about the way we give. Are we a pig in our giving or are we a chicken in our giving? Are we given what we can just keep replenishing without a real cost to ourselves?

[21 : 51] Or are we like the pig, giving something that costs us dearly? Throughout Luke's Gospel Jesus has said some very strong things about money.

We've only seen a couple of them in the last couple of weeks. He said you must store up treasure in heaven, not on earth. Beware building bigger and bigger barns lest God might say to you one night fool, I demand your soul tonight.

He said beware and take heed not to be greedy or covetous. Be rich towards God, not selfish, in accumulating possessions for yourself.

He challenged a rich man, a very religious rich man, to give away everything he had to the poor and follow Jesus. And Jesus said very bluntly, you cannot serve God and money.

Generosity, true Christian generosity, will only occur when wealth and money are not our gods. To the extent that we're generous, we are demonstrating our trust in God and not our idolatry of wealth.

[23 : 07] Jesus made these observations and made these comments here in Luke 21 in the last days before his death on the cross. He's arrived in Jerusalem on that Palm Sunday, the Sunday before the Friday he died and now he's in the temple precincts before condemning the temple itself.

In a few days' time, he will hang on a cross, giving up all his whole life for the sake of you and me, for our eternal salvation.

That's the model of supreme generosity. The one who, though he was rich, became poor for our sakes that we might become rich in God. If we heed the call of Jesus to discipleship of him as we ought, it will transform our giving, our attitude to wealth and our generosity.

For if Jesus is Lord of all our life, as he ought to be, we'll give generously. We'll plan to give. We'll budget to give. We'll sacrifice to give for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the most important thing that there is of all things.

Our weekly attitude to giving and the collection plate will change. We'll plan to give even the weeks when we're not here. We'll use envelopes if it helps us to give regularly.

[24 : 33] We'll ensure that we catch up for the weeks that we're away. And we'll give not only to our local church as the primary provider, if you like, of Christian ministry and fellowship and teaching and encouragement, but we'll also give to Christian missions and ministry agencies that are strategic for the sake of the gospel locally, nationally and internationally as well.

As we give, we'll rejoice to give. We'll delight to give more and more. And delight even in the sacrifices that we make in order to give more for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

So our attitude to giving will change. We'll recognise more and more that all the abundance that we have and really with maybe just one or two exceptions, we are very wealthy people.

We'll give not just out of our abundance and still live in the enjoyment and comfort of our abundance, but we'll give that it costs us to give, that it may even hurt us to give, but we give with joy.

Because in the end, it is the gospel of Jesus Christ that matters most in our universe. It is the gospel of Jesus Christ that brings salvation to people.

[25 : 51] And nothing else will do that. Nothing else transcends death. No matter what abundance of wealth we have, we cannot take it with us when we go. It is only the labour and the giving for the gospel that counts for eternity.

There's a sense in which even a fairly secular person like Andrew Carnegie, 130 years ago, knew that. When he argued that people should stop giving extravagant amounts to their children and give

for philanthropic institutions.

But as a Christian, I would say that our giving is to be gospel giving. Not just for charity and good causes, but for the sake of Jesus Christ. Nobody else will give for Christian causes.

And no other causes but Christian causes have an impact for eternity. The stinginess of the Christian West is constraining all the time Christian ministry and missionary work.

Here, overseas, in all places. As Jesus observed the rich people giving out of their abundance, he observed people who were chickens in giving.

[27 : 01] But as he observed the poor widow who gave all she had, he observed a pig in giving. So if you excuse the contrast and the challenge, be pigs in your giving.

Thanking God that Jesus Christ did not stop short of giving his all for us. And as we express our confidence and trust in God's promises, that he'll provide all that we need now and for eternity.

Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen.