

The Giving Jesus Loves

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Preacher: Rev Dave Brown

[0:00] Amen. Do keep your Bibles open. Mark chapter 12, let's pray, shall we?! Ask for God's help to understand and apply this passage.

Father, we thank you that we have your word in front of us this morning. We pray now, Father, that your Holy Spirit, who inspired these words to be written, might open our hearts to receive them and bend our wills to yours.

In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. So why are you in church this morning? There could be all kinds of reasons, couldn't there? You could be out of a sense of loyalty to someone else who's asked you to come.

You're just doing them a favour. It could be that this is just what you do on Sundays. It's what you've always done. You're here out of habit. It could be that there is something going on inside you, that you are searching for hope and peace and purpose.

And you think rightly, by the way, that the church is the place to come to find that in Jesus. It could be that you're after friendship, a sense of community.

[1:03] Churches certainly offer that. It could be that you're fed up with the rain and you just come in to keep dry for an hour or so. That would be nice. It could be, as I talked about earlier on, that you think you've come really to earn some brownie points.

That as you come to church, as you take communion, as you gather, then God will like you more and your salvation will be more secure. Or it could be that as you've taken bread and wine again this morning, you've been reminded of God's grace and mercy to you.

And you're here of thankfulness to learn more so you might serve him better. Why are you here this morning? And if you're involved in church in some way, serving, whether on the welcome team or with refreshments or whatever way, why do you do that?

If you put money in the place that's by the door or you give in other ways, why do you give? Again, it could be that you do that for a bunch of reasons. Maybe you're one of those lovely people who, when you turn up at a friend's house for a meal, you are first in the kitchen with your rubber gloves on, helping with the washing up.

Some people are like that, aren't they? Real helpful hearts. It could be that it's out of a sense of friendship. Someone else is on the coffee rota with you and you want to be with them, so you've joined just because of them.

[2:23] It could be out of a sense of frustration. You look around, you think, well, if I don't do it, no one will. That's sometimes sadly the case in church. It could be out of a sense of obedience to God's call.

You know God calls you to be active in service, so you've rolled up your sleeves. It could be, like some of the people in our passage this morning, that you love the applause and thanks and praise that you get, or the position, the title.

Oh, yes, I'm a welcomer, you know. Yes, could do with a badge, but we'll worry about that later. Maybe it's about that. Or again, it could be that you know that God has given so much for you that you want to offer something back to him.

Why are you here this morning? Why do you give? Why do you serve? I guess if we're honest, we all have a range of motives for gathering and giving and serving.

But if we're going to make sense of the passage that's before us this morning, well, we need to be honest with ourselves, first of all, and open to God's prompting and moving in our hearts so that he might challenge us on both the why and the how we gather and give and serve.

[3:34] So let's turn to Mark chapter 12, page 1018. That passage begins with Jesus teaching in the temple courts. We've been in this chapter for the last few weeks, and it seems as if Jesus has some words to begin with for the wider crowds.

That seems to be the case in verses 38 to 40. And then he calls his disciples to him for some individual teaching. Those are the last four verses. It's not surprising that Jesus directs some of his teaching to the wider audience.

He's been teaching openly in the temple courts, and as he's been doing that, the teachers of the law, amongst others, have come to him with questions seeking to discredit him. We've looked at some of their questions over the last few weeks, and we've seen their motives are often far from honourable.

But it's not just their questioning that's dubious, is it? Jesus here raises some huge questions about their motivation behind their work and their prayers and their conduct.

Watch out, he says, for those teachers of the law. They like to walk round in flowing robes, to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces. They love to have the most important seats in the synagogue, the places of honour of banquets.

[4:46] They love to devour widows' houses, and for a show, make lengthy prayers. These men will be punished most severely. I'm sure, though, if we were to go back in time and call these people aside and say, just tell us why you do what you do, they would have come up with some wonderful answers, wouldn't they?

They might have spoken about the honour of serving God in that way. The joy of being able to open up God's words. That if there was any honour due to them, well, that was all well and good, because it was an honourable thing that they did.

That, yes, they did pray lengthy prayers, but that's because God is so marvellous, and they want to keep praying to him. And, of course, if any financial rewards came their way, well, that was all well and good.

They had that kind of role afterwards, and the worker deserves his wages. They would have come up with all kinds of wonderful answers. But, of course, Jesus looks past those answers, doesn't he? He looks in on the heart.

And what he sees in them is not at all flattering. They're people who delight in their position, in the honour and respect their role gives them, far more than in what they do.

[5:58] Their lengthy prayers are not to an audience of one. They are very much to everyone gathered, and the more people, the better. And behind their outward religious show is a deep love of self, a love of power, and a love of money.

They may think they're doing it for God, but he's not really in the picture. They think they are serving people, but it's really a means to an end. All their work, all their prayers, their study, their devotion, over many years to get to this point, has been very largely self-serving.

And actually, that might be said to be true as well about those people down in verses 41 who are putting large amounts of money into the temple treasury. People often did that.

They would have brought their money for either a free will offering or to pay for the sacrifices that are being taken on their behalf further in the temple. Sometimes people gave money for the upkeep of various parts of the temple and its work.

And what would have happened? People would have come into the temple courts. They would have taken their money to a priest who would have examined it to make sure that it was the right kind of coinage.

[7:10] We saw that a few weeks ago, didn't we? No Roman coins allowed here. And then they would have been directed to one of 13 shofar chests scattered around the temple courts.

So imagine a large chest at the bottom with a large trumpet-like funnel coming up from the top. Large at the top, thin at the bottom so you couldn't get your hand in and take some money out. And having been examined by the priests, they would have put their money in. So imagine the scene for me. A well-dressed person comes forward very ostentatiously with a large bag of gold in their hands.

It's jangling a little as they walk up. The priest receives the money with a nod and remarks loudly about the size of the gift and their amazing generosity. And then with a flourish, they're directed to place the money in one of these trumpet tubes and they pour it in from a hype.

Can you hear it in your mind now? Rattling down. And the crowd turning to see what's going on. Amazed at someone giving so much. And the applause starts, Oh, well done.

[8:16] You're so generous. What a marvellous person you must be. Praise God for their goodness. But of course, God isn't getting the praise here, is he? Not really. The praise is going to the person doing the giving.

They're the ones being magnified, being made much of. Not God. Contrast that with the one poor widow who comes in. She makes her way to the front of the queue.

The only thing she has in her hand are two tiny little coins. They are all she has to live on. And that is virtually nothing. She's literally down to her last pennies and yet she brings them to God.

There's no round of applause here. There's no nod of thanks from the priest. No one could hear the sound of those coins going down the tubes. So there's no pats on the back.

No one notices except Jesus. He sees. And he sees not just the amount she puts in but how much it has cost her to do it. And so this woman becomes the object, becomes the subject of an object lesson for the disciples.

[9:24] Verse 43, Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth.

But she, out of her poverty, put in everything she had to live on. See the difference between those two attitudes, between their two acts? Whether for wealth or glory or honour or fame, those public shows of piety by the rich and the religious elites are mainly for their own benefit, not for God's.

But the poor woman is bringing everything she has to the Lord. Those in verses 28 to 41, well they're doing the right things, aren't we? We want to applaud them for that.

They are praying and giving and serving. They're teaching. They're working in God's kingdom. But it's largely for the wrong set of reasons. This poor widow with almost nothing to give comes with a heart that is humble and contrite before God.

She does what is right. So how about us? As God's spirit searches us this morning, asking those questions, why we do what we do, why we serve as we serve, why we gather week by week.

[10:40] What would the Lord Jesus find? Let those questions settle in the evening. As you mull that over. So what are the right reasons?

Why should we gather and give and serve? What does it mean to gather and give and serve for the right reasons? What does that look like? As I said earlier, that was the reason we began with communion today.

Because as we take bread and wine, we are reminded that we are not saved by our good works or our religious devotion. Important though those things are. There is nothing that you and I can do to make us right with God.

Nothing we can do to put God in our debt. Our hope, our only hope, is to come to God with empty hands, admitting our spiritual and moral poverty.

To come to him on bended knee, admitting our weakness, to change or do anything, to make ourselves right with him. And then to receive by repentance and faith all that Jesus has won for us on the cross.

[11:47] All those things are free gift of his grace. But having been fed by the Lord in that way, having received his mercy, well then we need to go out and live in the light of that great gift.

To live a life of thankfulness to him as we offer to him in return, and as our reasonable act of worship, ourselves, our lives, our all. See, many religions teach the opposite.

I said that earlier on. We cannot earn, though, our way to heaven or contribute to our salvation. The way the world works is like that. It is, I'll do this for you.

You can do that for me. We've seen that this week and some of the revelations from poor Mr. Mandelson. I'll do this for you. You do that favor for me.

The world works like that. The Christian faith doesn't work like that. Instead, for the Christian, our humble worship, our regular gathering, our willing service, our generous sacrificial giving, our ways that we express our gratitude to God for all that he has already done for us.

[12:55] They come out of a heart of thankfulness. The widow was grateful to God. She was reliant on God. She was humble before God. And so she came and she gave. And God saw.

She had an audience of one, didn't she, for what she did. And what she did, she did for him. So the driving force behind our obedience and service and giving must be thankfulness.

So how thankful are we, brothers and sisters? Do we truly appreciate the depth of our sin, the horror of hell from which God has saved us?

Are we awed by his love and holiness, his glory and majesty? Do we realize the full wonder of his grace and the worship we owe him? How much gratitude flows in your heart this morning to what God has already done?

See, if that gratitude is there, our lives will show it. It will be seen in our willingness to serve, in the generosity of our giving, in our regularity at public worship, in the way we spend our time, how we live throughout the rest of the week.

[14:05] And it will be seen to in the attitudes in which we do those things. Our giving and serving and gathering will be joyfully given. We won't begrudge them, however costly they might be.

Our hearts will be full of thankfulness and that thankfulness will overflow in praise and worship and giving and service to the one who bore our pain, who has saved our souls, who has brought us into his family.

So maybe it's time as we approach Lent for a personal audit. Maybe a family audit. Do it together. To reflect more on God's great salvation and all that he has done for us.

To examine how thankful we are and how much our lives demonstrate that. It's a good thing to do every so often because our circumstances change.

And what we have and what we can give, well that goes up and down, doesn't it, to our circumstances. That's one of the lessons that comes through in this little passage here. One of four principles the Bible gives us to shape our response to God's grace.

[15:13] Our giving and service should be proportional, sacrificial, regular, and as far as possible in secret. And they all apply to our time and our energy, our skills, as well as our finances.

I want to talk about each one very briefly before some final challenges. See, the way we respond to God's grace should be proportional to what we have. All of us have different levels of income, different amounts of energy, of opportunity, of different amounts of free time.

And those things go up and down, don't they? Sometimes you're in a position where you've got lots of free time. At other times, work commitments, family commitments, maybe poor health or age and infirmity take things up and down.

The right response from us in any particular time will take those into account. Where we have much, we should give much. Where we have little, well, God will expect little from us.

There's no shame in that. After all, God knows exactly what we've got. He knows our diaries, He knows our talents, He knows our bank accounts because He is the one who gave those things to us. So proportion is more important than amount.

[16:25] Are we offering God the right proportion of our time, of our energies, of our skills, of our money in relation to what He has given us? A right response is proportional to what God has given us.

It's also, though, sacrificial. The Bible speaks about giving sacrificially, showing how much we value what God has done for us. See, those rich people coming into the temple, emptying in their tens of thousands of pounds, perhaps.

Relatively speaking, they gave out of their wealth, Jesus says. So, I don't know whether we've got any multi-millionaires here this morning. I don't think we have. but if you were to pledge 10,000 pounds a month to church, well, it would be a huge gift.

But to be honest, if you're a multi-millionaire, it's kind of loose change. You might spend that on, you know, a new TV system or whatever. If you've got vast amounts, giving a large amount, well, you don't notice that.

But how does such a gift show gratitude if it doesn't cost us anything? A poor widow slipping in her last pennies into that offering, meaning that she would have no bread for her supper, well, she is giving a great personal cost.

[17:40] If you're retired, well, you might easily be able to find an extra two hours a week to serve in some way. If you're a busy parent or caring for an elderly or infirm relative, well, maybe finding two hours a month would be a real stretch.

It'd be a hard thing to do. But if we are truly thankful for what God has done for us in Jesus, then we may well be able to make those sacrifices and be willing to do it going out of the way.

The Bible also speaks of trying to give in secret so other people don't know. Now, we try our best to facilitate that with financial gifts. We don't take up an offering. We encourage people to give regularly through bank transfers.

And in that way, only our treasurer and our financial assistant know what people give. I have no idea who gives regularly and who doesn't and what people give. I don't know. And I don't want to know.

Giving can be done in secret. Serving is harder. Unless we want people to wear masks because they're welcoming you by the door or serving you tea. That seems a bit pointless.

[18:49] But maybe the implication here is to serve without a fuss. Without boasting about what we're doing. Seeking to make much of ourselves in the process. To accept compliments when they come but not to draw attention to our service.

So not to say things like, you know what? Oh, I was on the cleaning road for this week. Took me 14 hours to clean those toilets. As if you're wanting someone to come and pin a medal on your chest for doing such a thing.

Let's not seek to draw attention to ourselves as we serve. The last principle the Bible speaks about is giving regularly. Now that makes most sense with our finances. Paul in his letters to the churches talks about people setting aside week by week something they want to put in.

Making a clear decision. Making a plan. We might want to do that month by month so we make sure it happens. The parish giving scheme is a wonderful way to do that.

It's straight from your bank account. It allows our finance team to claim an extra 25% back from the government if you're a taxpayer and saves them a lot of work in doing that. But maybe the way we manage our diaries is a way to look at that as well.

[20:01] Choosing times each week when we are willing to serve. When we will do whatever needs doing with the skills and talents that God has given us. Proportional giving.

Sacrificial giving. Secret giving. Regular giving. And serving. And gathering. So what needs doing? What are the gaps here?

As a growing church as part of a larger parish there are lots of things to do and there is more that we want to do. Some of those are on the sheet that's going to come round as I keep speaking. I want to take those round now. Some of them are on the sheets there. As a growing church we need everyone who is committed to being part of God's family here and able to serve to play their part.

Now for you let me say right at the beginning that might not be you right now. You may think actually at the moment I cannot serve with any more time than I've got at the moment. Life is just too painful and too difficult.

[21:05] But for those of you that have got some ability to be able to serve and give then there are many ways to do that. That might be in joining a rota to clean or make refreshments or cook soup for lunch with God.

It might be joining the list of those people who serve us Sunday by Sunday reading the scriptures leading us in prayer or being part of the welcoming team. If you've got musical gifts we'd love to grow our music ministry on Sunday mornings.

I think we've got ten children with us this morning. Our children's work is growing here. But the team of people who are involved in delivering that is very very small and it's falling already on some very busy people.

If you've got skills and talents that you could use in that way we'd love to know. We want to be visiting homes in and around our churches with the good news of Jesus. So we want to grow an evangelism team.

If you've got technical skills or admin skills if you can use computer design programs where we can find ways of using those gifts. If you're a gardener or you can wield a fork or a spade or a hoe well we've got jobs for you to do around the church.

[22:17] Many of these things are not needed every week so it's not as if you'll be taking on another full-time job alongside what you've got already but they're all important. Some of them will involve extra responsibility leading teams rather than just being a team member but all of us in God's family here will have a role to play.

That might come with pledging to come and pray with us once a week or twice a month or and if you can't gather with us here in person why not work out where those times are they're always on the pew sheets and set that time aside so you pray with us at home while we are praying here. It might mean reassessing your financial giving joining that parish giving scheme. It might mean that if you can't do anything else well have you got a telephone at home can you call the people on the church family list and ask who they are?

Can you be part of growing our community right now? Now we've written some of those things down on a little form because what we'd like you to do over these next two weeks is to take that form away and pray about it.

To pray about what God is calling you to serve and then to bring it back and then we'll take it away from there. Now if you are new to St Paul's you're not quite sure whether you're settled with us yet or maybe you don't yet know what you make of Jesus then don't worry about those forms for now.

[23:49] That can come once you've been here a few months but for now let the church family serve and support you. The work can start once you've truly joined the family.

But if you've been here for ages and you're thinking well I came to church for encouragement this morning and now you're giving me work to do Dave let me give you two things to remember as I round things up.

Firstly let's remember what our motivation is. Our motivation is thankfulness for what God has already done for us. See the gift of our salvation came at incredible cost to Jesus and is of an incalculable value to us.

And whatever we feel God is calling us to give in terms of our time or energy or money well it can never be enough to repay the debt that we owe to God for what he has given to us.

And if we are starting to feel nervous about our time and our diaries and our energies and everything else well the antidote for that is to lift our eyes from those things and lift them up to God.

[25:00] To remind ourselves what he has done for us and cultivate that attitude of gratitude. God. And here's the second thing to remember.

Remember that God is good. Jesus said when people came to him that his yoke is easy and his burden is light. Serving him is a joy.

But actually God has given us so many good gifts to enjoy for our own pleasure and delight. Yes we have this call to give and gather and serve sacrificially. yet God almost never tells us and requires us that we give away everything that we have.

So much God has given to us is for our enjoyment and pleasure. And as Christians we need to be those who are grateful for that and are joyful in what God has given.

God loves to give good gifts to his children so please delight in what you have. Enjoy the biscuits that you've got later on. Enjoy your Sunday lunch. If you have a holiday this year don't feel guilty about taking it.

[26:05] If you need a new car because yours has broken down or is getting too old then that's absolutely fine. Rejoice in God's goodness. Thank him for his good gifts. Enjoy them with thankfulness in your heart.

But alongside enjoying all that God has given make sure we are considering how we respond to his goodness. How much of our time, how much of our money, how much of our energy should we be giving to him and offering for him to use.

And whatever it is let's do it cheerfully. Let's do it willingly. Let's do it knowing that we can never ever out give God. For when we give and gather and serve with a heart of thankfulness and love no matter what it is that we might offer, a huge bag or a tiny amount, those two little coins, as we respond with a heart of thankfulness we find that that is the kind of giving that Jesus loves, the kind

he wants from us.

May God help us to do that and build his church through us willing of service. Amen.