

Living Giving: Tithing - 6th March 2022

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[0 : 0 0] this week we're starting a new Sunday series which we're calling Living Giving. A series which over these next four weeks we're going to be thinking about money. Silence.

Yeah we're going to be thinking and taking a look at bread, bucks, cash, dollars, dosh, dough, lolly loot, filthy lucre, moolah, notes, quids, readies, sheets, spondoolies, wonga. All right whatever you call it, whatever we name it that's what we're going to be looking at in light of God's ideals for how we receive, how we share, how we steward it and how we give it. Now I know money as a topic it's not something that we talk about too regularly I hope here because there's other things in life than money obviously but it's probably up there with a topic that's about as welcome as something to contemplate in public as sex or our toilet habits. It's the kind of top three of things not to really think about. We tend to see it as a very private personal thing. So our income, what we spend it on, any savings you might have, whatever debts we carry in this green and semi-pleasant land we tend to keep our cash cards close to our chest and yet as with most things that we would rather perhaps keep private, Jesus prefers instead to get things out of the open as when we read the gospel accounts. It's interesting about one in three things that Jesus says are in some way related to money whether that's in his teaching, his parables, his observations about how it's used or the influence that it can have over us. But really Jesus's teaching just follows in a long line of biblical thinking on this as money and treasure get a regular airing in the Hebrew scriptures what we call our Old Testament. So in the book of 1 Chronicles for example we're told that in funding the work to build the first temple in Jerusalem the tribal leaders, the commanders, the officials and so on we're told that they gave towards the work on the temple of God 5,000 talents and 10,000 daricks which is old school measures going into hundreds of tons of gold, 10,000 talents of silver, 18,000 talents of bronze and 100,000 talents of iron and those who had precious stones gave them to the treasury of the temple of the Lord. Now we'll talk about the treasury of the temple a little more later on but what's clear for these folks as the book of 1 Chronicles tells us is that they believed they were giving back to God only what he had given them in the first place. Indeed King David says a famous prayer after these gifts of daricks and talents of gold and silver and bronze and so on had been received.

He says this, yours oh Lord is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor for everything in heaven and earth is yours. Everything comes from you and we have given you only what comes from your hand. It's a prayer which is also a timeless truth. All things, all things come from God. Everything we have, everything we experience, all that we enjoy, all our skills, abilities, opportunities, all that we are, even our ability to earn money, it's a gift from God and not only is that a life-shaping realisation, what's equally true I think is that whilst God gives life in all of its variety to each of us as a gift, still everything ultimately belongs to God. Everything in heaven and on earth is yours, says the prayer. I mean you'll know as well as me, we come into this life with nothing and we leave this life with nothing. Which means that for the time we're here, we're effectively stewards, you know, managers, overseers if you like, of whatever God lovingly but temporarily entrusts into our hands.

So what are we to do with what God entrusts to us, into our care? Well we're called to invest what God gives to us, our time, our talents, our money. We're called to invest into helping to make this world the best it can be, a place of love and community, of kindness and generosity, a place where those who have more share with those who have less to ensure that everyone can enjoy and experience the full ideal of this common life. That's God's economy if you like, that's God's plan for us to share and to give and be generous with whatever we've received so that everyone has enough, so that everyone is free, including us, to enjoy the fullness of this gift of life. So money used correctly, used generously, really can make the world of difference. And yet the flip side of this economic model that God has installed is that if that we deny that everything is a gift, you know, if we hoard, if we're greedy, if we keep back for ourselves more than we really need, well God's model begins to unravel with that. See greed leads to inequality. Inequality leads to hardship and hardship leads to poverty. And all of a sudden God's model for how to live isn't being followed and community life ceases to be something which all can enjoy.

And not only does that bring grief to us as humans for those who have the least, but more importantly than that even, it brings grief to God. For example, we're going to look at a tough passage this morning.

[6 : 22] Have a listen to this from the book of Malachi, in which God addresses the people of Israel in this way. He says, But you ask, says God, how are we to return? Will anyone rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you ask, how are we robbing you?

In tithes and offerings, says God. You are under a curse, your whole nation, because you are robbing me. Bring the whole tithe into the treasury that there may be food in my house. And it carries on.

Test me in this, says the Lord Almighty, and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it. I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your field will not drop their fruit before it is ripe.

Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land. Now that comes from the last book in the Old Testament as we have it, Malachi. And it's a pretty full-on statement from God, both in his criticism of the people at the time, but also in God's commitment to them if they follow his commands. So let's just unpack that a little bit.

So for a start, I don't know what struck you most in that one. For me, I think the most striking bit is this notion that the people are somehow robbing God. Now the original word which is used in the Hebrew for rob is an unusual one, because it conjures up ideas of something being plundered or pillaged in a way someone powerful would do to someone weaker than them. But rather strangely, this is what God says the people are doing to him as if they are strong and he is weak. How can this be so?

[8 : 31] Well, says God, it's your lack of generosity with your money which is robbing me of being able to put my plans in place. You're keeping too much and you're giving too little away. And because you're robbing me of what I've asked you to share out, other people, the weakest among you, are suffering.

Now it's interesting though, that the people hadn't recognised and couldn't see what they were doing. They ask, how are we robbing you, God? And it's interesting because of all the things which can tempt us away from how God would want us to live, it seems money, certainly in the pages of the Bible, has this almost unique ability to reel us in and distract us, to blind us even.

From the impact it has on us. You see, money is so tempting, so seductive, so sneaky in what it tempts us to succumb to, that it's no wonder that Jesus says in Luke 12, watch out. Be on your guard against all kinds of greed. Watch out. And when Jesus says watch out, we better watch out. He means it.

Watch out. In other words, we need to be very wary of money and its hold over us. Watch out. That it doesn't make us justify greedy behaviour. You know, those things we find it easiest to spend money on without even realising the hold those things have over us. I mean, think for a moment, if you can. What do you find it easiest to spend money on? Is it your home? Is it your clothes? Your car?

Is it holidays? Is it drinking? Is it eating out? Is it music? Is it sport? Or maybe you love saving money and the security that offers? Maybe you're saving money to ensure your children's or your grandchildren's security? Jesus says, watch out on that. He says that to you and to me. Watch out.

[10:50] Be on your guard. Be on our guard. That those things don't become so easy to spend on, so easy to justify, that we want more than we need. And that our sense of perhaps self-security sometimes hinders our ability instead to put our faith and trust in God to provide. That's one thing to think about. But that passage in Malachi though, after God accuses the people of robbing him, he fleshes out what he means. He says, how are you robbing me? In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse. That's a strong word. Your whole nation, because you are robbing me. Bring the whole tithe into the treasury that there may be food in my house. So what's going on here? What are people that are not giving to God? Everything that he's asked them to. They're not bringing what's called the whole tithe with them to the temple. What is a tithe?

In case we don't know. Well, there's an agreement which evolved over time between God and the people in which they were asked to give 10% of their income to God's work, which meant that they could also then keep 90% of their income for their own costs, their own clothes, their own food, their own housing and so on. And it was a good system. It was a good system because it meant people could give some money away whilst looking after their own needs with a clear conscience. This tithe model from God was a very freeing, kind of guilt-free way of handling money. The 10% that we might give away shows that we're grateful to God for all of his gifts to us. The 90% that God says you can keep shows that God understands our need to be self-supportive. It's a win-win kind of economic model. And yet it seems here that the people were withholding some of this 10% agreed offering.

What did this offering go to? Well, if we recall, God says, bring the whole tithe into the treasury, the whole 10%, that there may be food in my house. So this tithe, this 10% of income, it was given so that there may be food. Food for who? That was food which would enable those who were hungry to be fed. And that's why I think God is so miffed about this, because in withholding even their 10%, the people were causing others in need to go without, without a willingness to give, without a willingness to share. God's economic model, you know, this redistribution of wealth so that everyone had enough, but began to fall apart and it didn't work. Now, importantly in this story, it seems that even those who had little, even those who would say they were going hungry, were still expected to tithe, bless you, that's official, they were still expected to tithe and give 10% of what they did have, because in doing so, not only were they given the dignity of being able to play their part in helping others, even if they had not very much, they were still asked to give, because that gave them dignity to think they could contribute, but it also meant they were buying into and supporting a system for the community, which would in turn enable them to receive the food they needed out of everyone else's tithes that they'd have brought in.

You know, we'll talk more about this principle of being willing to both give and receive next week, because for me, a willingness to ask for help when necessary is a key part of what it means to be a proper community under God in which all needs are met. But with this willingness to give, to tithe, well, I says, God, if you can do that, just watch how I can meet everyone's needs through it.

You know, sometimes in the Bible, God says, don't put me to the test. Here, he says, yeah, test me in this. I mean it, test me in this. And see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it. See, tithing is a two-way relationship between people and God. It's a partnership. It's a two-way promise of generosity and love through which all people will be blessed. The ideal being that all people, through generosity, will have enough. And what's more, even though this is in ancient times, as we might understand it, this principle of tithing is actually something which Jesus himself endorsed. You see, even though people in Jesus's day were on the whole living in dreadful hardship, you know, dealing with poor harvest. We know there were famines at the time of Jesus.

[16 : 04] There was real poverty. Under the Romans, who had such an oppressive tax rate, that everything from income and sales to the use of bridges and roads was taxed. They reckon the tax level was up to 90% of income sometimes from the Romans.

Now, despite that poverty that was there, Jesus still commended tithing because he knew it was a system which ensured the poorest wouldn't go without.

So there's one time when Jesus, as he sometimes did, was criticising the Pharisees for being hard-hearted. And he says this, he says, You tithe even your herbs, but neglect the more important things like justice, mercy, and forgiveness.

You should practice these. You should practice the latter, but not neglect the former. Don't neglect the tithe. In other words, you know, of course, prioritising being just and merciful, forgiving is right.

That's the important stuff in life. But don't forget to tithe as well. That's the baseline. That's the starting point on which everything else is built.

[17 : 18] And I think for me, I would say that tithing, that giving away at least 10% of our money is a principle which God calls us to follow to this day.

Now, if that seems like a tall order, I understand that. I understand that. And maybe working our way up to 10% over a year or two might be something which is a bit more achievable.

Equally, though, I understand that every household circumstance is different. And if you live, say, with a partner who doesn't want to give to charity, who's anti-church or who holds all the purse strings in your home, working out how to give from your own share or funds is often not simple.

And whatever we do, the last thing I'd want is for anyone's giving to cause friction in their home life. But in commending this idea of tithing, I don't think I would dream of suggesting anything that I don't do or else I'd be a hypocrite.

So, in the spirit of disclosure, Gemma and I have tithed as a minimum. We've tithed our gross pre-tax income from the day we were married.

[18 : 40] Income which includes my wage and also once we had kids, also includes tax credits and the child benefit we receive. We tithe all that. We see it all as a gift from God and simply try to be obedient with following what God says.

And it's not easy. Blimey neck is not easy. There are times I look back and I think, because I have to do my sort of tax returns and that includes sort of gift aid giving and stuff. I look back sometimes and I think, that would have been a cracking holiday.

My goodness. And I, oh, it's okay. And also, I'm not daft. The rising cost of living, flippin' heck, that is a concern. At the moment.

But, in my experience, in our experience as a family, I just want to say three quick observations on this. Firstly, God has faithfully kept his side of the deal and he's never let us go short.

Somehow there's always been enough to cover our costs and we've been blessed by the generosity of others or God has given us an ability to find a bargain that's at the right time, which somehow God prompts or points out to us.

[19 : 54] So God faithfully keeps his side of the bargain, the deal, in one way or another. Secondly, though, tithing is incredibly liberating because when our giving comes out at the beginning of each month, as it does out of our care, our genuine intention is that it is to give God his worth.

And that helps to kind of keep things clearer, I suppose, between us and God and how we relate, particularly how we think about money with God. But it also, because it comes out automatically, it limits the pull that it might otherwise have over us.

So it's freeing to tithe as well. But then thirdly, there is real joy in giving too. As we know that what our tithe goes to, it helps other people and we can see that.

It's not a pride thing. It's all God's anyway. It's nothing to do with anything that we've achieved. Rather, it's a joy thing because it's a privilege to be able to partner with God in seeing the blessing that his gifts, when distributed, can bring.

God says with tithing, test me on this. Test me. It's a command. Test God. Put God to the test with this. And I can indeed testify to the goodness which God brings to our lives and the lives of others through the principle of giving, of tithing.

[21 : 20] Now, who might we be called to give our tithe to? In Bible times, people were called by God to give their tithe, their whole tithe, to the temple treasury because the temple helped to support the entire society at the time as well as offering services of worship for the nation.

It was a place of education, of counselling, of pastoral care, of food provision and aid for those in need across the country. It's like a one-stop shop, you know, a community, social, financial and spiritual centre for the nation all rolled into one.

You know, all ways in which God's mission and ministry was offered. Now, these days, there is no one-stop shop for all of that. There is no temple, thankfully, in many ways.

So these kind of initiatives are all split between all sorts of organisations and charities, all sorts of ministries and churches, both home and abroad. So I think I want to say this morning that unless you're giving much more than 10% away, and some can afford to do that.

I personally don't think that a local church, such as here at St. John's, should be the recipient of all of our tithe.

[22 : 36] As otherwise, none of us would be able to support any other charities or causes which rely on people's giving. And yet the beauty of giving at least some of our tithe, maybe even half of our tithe, 5% of our income, to our own church, is that we get to see firsthand the impact that our personal giving is making.

Helps us to become more connected, more of a stakeholder in what's going on. Helps us to take an interest in how our money is used, what areas of ministry it's being put into.

We get to see firsthand the fruit that grows over time that our tithe can produce because of God's goodness in multiplying it for the sake of our community and beyond.

So for that reason, whilst Gemma and I do support some other charities, most of our giving comes to St. John's because I see the good that this, I'm in a privileged position, I see the impact that this church has, not just on Sundays, but across the board, across the week in our community.

And I trust the ones who hold the purse strings, I trust our treasurer, I trust the PCC, our church trustees, to use our church funds wisely. Indeed, as a church, we made it a sort of principle that St. John's gives 10% away of the giving we receive to other charities, other organisations like Pathway and Life for Children and Food Bank and so on, because tithing is a good principle for organisations as well as individuals.

[24 : 13] And we'll be sharing more in these next few weeks about our church spending, about our giving and how they tie together, the kind of things that we spend our income on as a church.

And if you've got any questions on that, we want to be as transparent as possible, so do come and see me. But for each of us, whatever our situation, how we divvy up our own tithe is for us to work out as individuals, to pray through and weigh up with God.

I don't know the amounts that people as individuals give to St. John's. I try to avoid knowing because the amount you give is between you and God.

It's none of my business. But the beauty of giving a percentage and not a set amount that God prescribes, the beauty of the tithe model is that whether 10% of our income works out as a fiver or £500 a month, it's a model of giving which enables each of us to play our part in growing God's kingdom here on earth as in heaven.

And as I said before, I want to underline this and we'll unpack it more next week. Whilst I believe that tithing is a call God places on each of us, if you are in financial need or if tithing or the prospect of it means that you fear you'll be pushed over the financial edge, then do please come and talk confidentially with me or Ruth or Marie in the office, your house group leaders or so on, someone you know who you can just talk candidly with because the principle of tithing, as I said before, but I want to underline, is that through each of our tithes coming in, anyone in our midst with particular financial needs or worries, the idea is that we can help to meet those needs.

[26 : 07] That's the redistribution, if you like, of the idea of church and God's kingdom. And I also want to say though, for those who do give, who are giving, you know, as vicar of St. John's, I'm really grateful for your faithfulness and generosity because as a charity, it's only through your giving, our giving, that we can do what we do.

Without the giving, we'd be, the doors are closed, we'd be absolutely shafted. So I'd love us to be able to do more. There are ideas we got that we can't roll out because we haven't got the funds sufficient to do them as yet.

But for where we are now, particularly with all that we've gone through in the last couple of years, the way the giving has been sustained through the pandemic, well, that's been amazing, to be honest.

And I'm personally very grateful for that. But I know as a community, the feedback I get from people, and that's through the generosity of the giving, which has been coming in, that we've been able to sustain and do what we've been able to do.

So in terms of practicals, though, if you want to start or increase your giving to St. John's here, there are various ways to do that. Ideally, that comes through a regular standing order because that helps us to budget and know what we've got roughly coming in.

[27 : 21] You can do one-off bank transfers, there's a card machine in the foyer, there's a Just Giving link on our website, or you can give good old fashion cash on the plate by the door as well.

And if you're a tax player, then we can reclaim 25% on any donations you make. And that makes a big difference to what we're able to do as well. No expense to you, just sign a form and we get the money back from the government.

And a church bank account details and so on, and gift aid forms. We've got a number of these forms dotted around, some in the foyer, some over there. They're on the website as well. So if you want to have a look at those, you'd be most welcome.

I wanted to sort of start with that today because that kind of sets the foundation, hopefully, for what we're going to be looking at in the next two or three weeks. And we'll have a different slant on that each time.

But I think above all for today, and I'll close with this for now, I think although I said at the top that talking about money can be an uncomfortable, private thing for us, giving to God's work, giving our tithe, the income that God has given us, and tithing that and entrusting it into his care.

[28 : 33] Well, for me, it's simply part and parcel of what it means to serve and follow Jesus. And I can testify to the blessing it is to be learning that lesson in my life.

As David prays, all good things come from you, God, and it is of your own do we give you. And so as we make our way through this living, giving series, my prayer, for me and for you, is that God would give us generous hearts and open hands as we put our faith into practice this week and beyond.

Thank you. Thank you.