

Living Giving: Investing In The Kingdom - 27th March 2022

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[0 : 00] So good morning everyone. I must say there are slightly more of you than I thought when I was preparing this. I thought sunshine, Mothering Sunday and the clocks going back would mean I'd have a fairly empty house. Forward, forward, which is always worse. Except I am waiting for those beautiful summer evenings, aren't we all? Yeah. So we are talking about what it means to live well with money as individuals in a church. Stay with me. I can see some faces, especially in the front row.

This is a really difficult topic, especially for people like us locally, because it can seem really personal. This is my money. How do I spend it? How much I earn? And that's not unreasonably personal just because we're uptight and mean. It's actually really rational, isn't it? Because as a society, we judge people way too much for how much they earn, for how they spend their money, for what they do for a living. It isn't right, but we all do it. It's one of those classic opening questions, isn't it? What do you do? And I kind of think our unwillingness to talk about it is kind of a very British resistance to that capitalist structure, you are what you do, where we just make out that it's really, really rude to ask us, often by like stiff upper lip and back off, end the conversation now. And I think it is one of the great sicknesses of modern society that we do judge people by what they have, that we reduce people to what they earn, that we define their lives by the small luxuries that they spend their money on. And how to live well with money is a huge question that we all struggle with as Christians, but mostly in private on your own. I don't know about you, but how to live well with money is one of the questions that has kept me up at night and frequently given me nightmares. I mean, some of the things that Jesus says about how to live well with money are just terrifying, aren't they? I don't know. Maybe that's just me. So I think it's also in our society really normal to be completely overcome with shame when you think about money, when you think about what you spent money on, when you think about what you haven't spent money on.

And this week in particular is a particularly bad week to talk about money, because we've just had the spring mini budget, which is going to lead to a real cut in the standard of living for a lot of people.

And I don't know about you, but my energy bills are going right up. I bet all of yours are too, at a terrifying rate. And one of the realities about the war in Ukraine is that Ukraine is the nation which produces most of the world's food. It's everything from wheat to sunflower oil.

So as a result of this war, as a result of those fields going up in flames, we are all going to see a huge increase in the cost of basic food essentials. And to be honest, some of the budget was just strange. So I don't know about you, but I'm there desperately trying to work out what effect this will have on me. I've got no idea. Could go either way. But ultimately, money is pretty key to how we live a good life. It's the way that you can make a material difference in the world. Money is the difference between starving and surviving for a lot of people. So as individuals and as church, we need to find a way of having this conversation in a healthy way. You can't change the world without money as the world is currently set up. So if you do want to make the world a better place, money has to be on the agenda. It's also something which we're really encouraged by Jesus to talk about. Isn't it something like one in three of the things that Jesus says is actually about money and how to live well with money? So it is really important as a church that we are talking about it in times like this living, giving series. So that's the kind of basis. And I guess before I tell you anything else about money, you're going to have to know a little bit about my particular and slightly strange relationship with money. So I must say, Matt said, oh, give a bit of your personal testimony about your relationship with money. He has no idea. So this has been sweat out a little bit.

[4 : 54] But yes, basically, so I don't know where my feelings about money came from, but I've always been very risk averse when it comes to money. I often feel really intense shame about spending money on myself, except for shoes for preaching, which I do obviously sell as an icebreaker. But yes, so I try and wrap it up like that. There's a reason why I'm spending money like this. It's not about me. I feel bad about spending money about me. This must be about other people, so I don't have to feel ashamed about it. And so I am really weird about money. The first time I ever paid to have my hair cut was when I was 26. And let me tell you, I think James and my best mate Dirk both received about 50 text messages saying, it costs 25 quid. Are you sure that's okay? But is it okay? I'm not sure it's okay. Are you sure that's okay? At the end of it, Dirk was just like, just get it done. We have to get through this somehow. Prior to that, I would do exactly as on the screen. I would tie my hair into a large ponytail at the top of my head and whack across it with the kitchen scissors. It looked terrible. To be clear, it did look terrible. Pretty much all of my clothes, apart from trainers and these, which seem to wear through ridiculously fast, and underwear, come from charity shops even today. And as James will testify, when it came to our first ever holiday, I freaked out. I was like, this isn't okay. I was like, we've got to cancel it and we can just dislocate the phone for a week and not go out. I'm also pretty nervous about debts. Honestly, I'd rather eat nothing for a week than see my account get overdrawn. I'd rather buy the first round of drinks always, because I want to know what I owe other people, and I want control over that. I have never, ever in my entire life, ever let anyone pay for food for me at a date, because I didn't want people to feel like they had power over me. It's always important to me that I can walk away. I even refused to go on a date with one guy because he was just too rich, and even though he's quite sweet, it wasn't happening. Money is too important to me for that. So yes, when I go out for a meal and someone else picks up the check, even today, it makes me sweat physically. So when it comes to money, I don't know where my anxieties come from. My parents are reasonably healthy, rational individuals. Probably, probably, honestly, this is some kind of pride. I don't like to owe other people anything. And honestly, I prefer it if they owe me something. That's almost certainly a control thing. It's kind of about economically keeping the trade balance in my favour. And so when it comes to giving, I must say my giving has, if I'm honest about it, also been a way of preventing myself from feeling that God has any power over me, that I owe God anything, which is absolutely nuts when you think about it, isn't it? Because everything comes from God, and of his own, do we give him? But I don't want to owe God any more than I owe anyone else.

So until four years ago, I used to live like a yo-yo diet giver. There would be one month where I would give absolutely everything away. And then I kind of freak out. And then I would not give anything for a few months. And then there'd be a huge binge again, which also isn't very healthy. I'd say even now, some of my giving comes from guilt. So for example, I pay a monthly fee to a community interest charity called REN to offset all of my carbon emissions each month. And because I'm kind of paranoid about this, I do it at a 300% rate. I don't want to get any carbon emissions to escape through the system. I want to be really sure that I'm not contributing net carbon to the atmosphere.

And I guess that's my way of trying to claw back control over my role in the climate crisis, which is also nuts, if you think about it. So I am not the healthiest person to stand at the front and talk about money. But I am on a journey to a better place. So let's invite you on the journey and just take my kind of weird things and just think, don't worry about them too much.

And a lot of how I ended up being in a healthier place stemmed from a really helpful church placement I did at a rough estates church in Birmingham. While I was there, I was shadowing a female assistant minister called Janet Knox. And she's frankly some kind of saint. And we ended up talking a lot about money. And she introduced me to the idea of money as investing in the kingdom, or giving regularly as being part of the project of God. So at the moment, what we do is we give 10% of our income and keep a small pot for last minute compassion emergencies. And it's definitely helped me move away from guilt-ridden yo-yo giving to a more positive approach.

So as James and I are working hard to establish a healthier relationship with money, that means moving away from seeing giving as something I do out of guilt, to something that is a really positive invitation to take part in the kingdom of God.

[10 : 25] So at the moment, we split our giving four ways to places where we've encountered God in the world. Places which seem holy. Places which seem like they're part of the kingdom of God.

So I'm going to tell you just a tiny bit about all of those causes, because I really believe in them. And they're a joy to talk about. So at the moment, we give some of the money that we give each month to St. John's.

And we give it because we really believe in the message here. We believe the message this church lives out is one of welcome, invitation, and loving the local community.

Loving the people and loving God and doing so in the most personal way you possibly can, with care and attention. And that's something I see every time I come to something at St. John's, especially the drop-in, especially little friends, is the love that we all pour out into the community every day.

We also give money to my mother church, which is St. James's Piccadilly. Now, when I mean mother church, I mean the church which formed me in the faith.

[11 : 35] The one that helped me become the Christian I am today. When we talk about Mothering Sunday, in the old school style, it wasn't really about mothers. It was about remembering spiritually where you've come from.

And I guess St. James's Piccadilly is a particular building where, occasionally, when I'm going off the rails, God comes and yells in my ear. So, it's kind of a holy space for me in that regard.

So, we do still give to them. We also give to Tier Fund. Some of you may know that James did a gap year with Tier Fund, which helped him become the person he is today, when he was going through a bit of a rough time.

I personally have a lot of time for Tier Fund, because James and I both have family members who primarily grew up abroad. So, the international focus is important to us. For us, being church, being one body, isn't just the people in this room, it's people all over the globe.

We are one body, even the people we can't see, the faces we can't even imagine. And for us, being church means remembering people who are facing huge injustices every day.

[12 : 45] It also reminds us that, in many ways, people like James and I are part of those unjust structures, and we owe it to others to try and tackle that. And finally, we give to Pathway, because on a day-to-day basis, each week, I'd say Pathway is the place where I worship God most authentically.

It's the place where I feel most like the version of a priest that God is calling me to be, and it's also an amazing source of hope to meet all of those astonishing, brave women who leave their homes and try and live a better life, who are willing, at an individual level, to turn round to abusive people and say, no, enough is enough.

Those women knock me off my feet each week, with their simple, practical hope and bravery. So, I guess, giving to the places where we experience God, where we worship and find God, helps James and me think about what it means to be a Christian.

Helps us think, what does the kingdom of God look like on earth, and how can we be a part of that? Most of these charities are kind of doing an unglamorous thing day-to-day.

They're kind of giving people a cup of tea, some space to get out. But it is those small, unglamorous things that change lives in the most amazing ways. So, you've heard a bit of my story now.

[14 : 12] We're going to turn back to the Bible. We're just going to hear a tiny snippet of Matthew's Gospel. It comes from the Sermon on the Mount. So, just as a tiny bit of context, take this or leave it, but I think it's interesting.

Matthew's Gospel is structured in this kind of awesome way, it's split into five sections. And each of these sections has a kind of action section, and then a little bit of a teaching section, which is a kind of selection of Jesus' top sayings.

I don't think that the Sermon on the Mount was a really long sermon Jesus gave, but I do think it's a really good reflection of some of Jesus' best teaching. I think if Jesus' primary way of teaching was really long sermons, I don't know if we'd be here.

But I think that when they were writing Matthew's Gospel, Matthew was trying to tell the story of how he'd been this good Jew who only believed in one God, and then thought that his bloke, his mate, was God.

And he had to think really hard about how he was going to tell that story, so it would convince other people. So basically, Matthew does this really cool thing, where he splits his Gospel into five sections, and these books kind of roughly correspond to the first five books of the Bible.

[15 : 27] The Pentateuch, if you want the posh word. But Matthew is trying to explain who Jesus is, and he's trying to say, this guy really is God. So he's starting by telling, this is the story of God, this is how this relates to it.

So the bit we've got today, the Sermon on the Mount, is kind of coming from section one, which is kind of the equivalent of the Genesis book. It's an origin story, a story of how God created us to live well, how to live well on earth.

Then the second section, which we're not doing today, but I'm telling you about anyway, because I find it interesting, is like Exodus, which is about going out into the world, and mission, and so on.

So where this passage comes from matters, it's from the first section, which is kind of like Genesis. So it's about living well on earth. And that tells us something really important, because when Matthew's talking about the kingdom of heaven, he's not talking about what's happening after death.

He's talking about what we can do here now, to make the world a better place. And it isn't a promise for everything being better after we die. It's a promise for how the world really can be, and how God wants it to be.

[16:38] So, we're going to listen to the scripture now. Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal, but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal.

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. So, it's just a tiny bit, but, and this is just if you want to go back to it, but it's just a little tiny bit of three sayings, which are all about how, what you prioritize in life matters.

What you spend time and money on matters. How you focus your aims on matter, and what you strive for matters. And basically, the way I would sum it up is that when Jesus says, don't store up your wealth in barns, he means there are kind of two ways of living.

You can either live in a way that prioritizes God, than people and things, or you can live in a way that prioritizes things, than people, than God.

And that really, there are those two options. In reality, I've never met anyone who puts people at the top. It's either God, or something that's equivalent to God.

[18:07] It's an ideology. It's a scripture. It's an understanding of value, something beyond people, beyond things, than people, than things, or things, people, God.

And God ultimately is saying, I'm the God of love. If you put me at the top, then everything will sort itself out. So, let's go back.

But basically, we all know people who talk the talk, and say, I live God, people, things. But in reality, when they live their life, they actually value the things more than the people or God.

I mean, gosh, that's me sometimes, to be clear. It's not just other people. But in this section, when Jesus says, do not store up your wealth in barns, he's basically saying, the way you spend and use your resources on earth matters.

You can spend all your money on stuff. You can put it into a savings account where it will be used to invest in things that you have no control over by a bank that you don't really know.

[19:15] You can spend your money on stuff, actual stuff. But in reality, stuff will never satisfy you. A really scary amount of people spend money on things they don't want to impress people they don't like.

But there's also this invitation to something more exciting, investing, which is investing in the kingdom of God, making that vision of the Sermon on the Mount possible in this world.

And investing in the kingdom of God isn't just about giving money to church and expecting to have loads of dosh in heaven. It's about building the kingdom of heaven here on earth so people shouldn't ever endure hell on earth.

So I see the kingdom, which is often really hard to think about because it's this better world which kind of started with the cross but hasn't completely materialized yet.

It's kind of here and not yet here as a kind of ripple effect. You know how there are sometimes some actions of pure love, pure kindness that just change the whole atmosphere and inspire everyone else that comes across it to do better.

[20 : 30] And that creates a little ripple. And then that person inspires someone else to do better. And there's this big change from just a tiny little thing at the start. I think small actions can really transform lives like that.

So what are some examples of this? Because it sounds a bit theoretical right now. I guess one of the examples is, well for me, I guess part of my calling to be a priest came after I had just been mugged in South London completely my fault to be clear.

And I'd been mugged by some medium teenagers. Probably if I turned around and said no really loudly they would have all run away. But I didn't. I gave them all my stuff. And I was up all night giving evidence in the police station and then the next morning to do an identity parade to try and identify the person who mugged me.

At this point I had all my resources with me. I had James on one side, my mum on the other side. And we were sat in the police station waiting it out. Now honestly, those South London coppers are not the most organised.

So opposite us in the waiting room were the family of the kid I was going to identify. And we were all kind of left in this waiting room. They brought their priest.

[21 : 48] And because it was ours we ended up kind of chatting. So the kid's mum was reading A Thousand Splendid Sons in Somali. She didn't speak much English but her priest sat there and just gently translated.

So we talked about the book which my mum had read, I'd heard about and speculated about and she was reading. And the priest didn't really say anything. He didn't say be kind.

He didn't say anything spectacular. He just sat there translating the conversation so that we could talk to each other and reminding us all that God was in that waiting room too.

And it was like just that reminder of the bigger picture. So as you all know for me anti-racism has always been one of the big callings in my life from my family background and I really do understand how bad our prison system is for kids especially non-white kids.

And while we never talked about it when it came to identifying the kid who mugged me I knew who it was but I didn't say. Now you probably you have all sorts of opinions about that but I chose not to identify her because I just felt God saying no not now.

[23 : 05] don't put another stumbling block in front of this child. And I don't know if that experience changed the girl's life. It may not have made any difference at all. She may have been on the journey she was on.

But it did change mine. Because clearly in that moment I saw who I was supposed to be. I wanted to be like that priest and hold the space for God in spaces where it's easy to get caught up in anger, pain and loss and remind people when they might lose it that there is a bigger broader vision for the world.

What are some other local effects? So I think locally one of the most impressive ripple effects has been the initial 10,000 pounds that Martin Lewis from Money Saving Expert gave Matt, Richard and Esther when they were setting up Burnt would be a friend.

Now Burnt would be a friend you must have all heard about it it's a local charity supporting local people. And the charity hadn't really kicked off until it got the first bit of funding.

And I don't think Martin Lewis has ever even been to Burnt would but he took a risk. I reckon that Matt wrote a pretty good grant proposal too. And he made that initial payment that made it possible.

[24 : 23] And as a result of having faith and being generous to our local people Burnt would be a friend has grown into quite a big thing that employs three, four people. It's no longer just an emergency response.

It's going to be a permanent staple in our local community helping people develop sustainable lifestyles and overcome systematic poverty and injustice through things like the community store.

Another example of a time when ripple effects can just change the world and they can be ripple effects small moments of kindness or cash is and you might not know about this but locally I recently heard about the amazing work that Russell Brand is doing.

I didn't know much about it until recently but last week I met a lady in Pathway who just left a recovery centre which Russell Brand sponsored.

And not only had Russell Brand paid for several people to go into rehab for complete nothing but he also goes in every month to encourage people and he's quite quiet about it.

[25 : 32] He's loud about a lot of things and he's kind of quiet about this so I was quite impressed. And the lady I was talking to said that Russell Brand is the person who told her your partner's abusive and you should leave which I think is amazing actually because her life is going to look completely different now.

What an amazing impact this one individual has had on multiple lives as a result of just a little money, time and care. And even more inspiring she'd been so convinced by the recovery centre that the first thing she was saying was come on, you're local what are the local charities that I could get involved in to support other people in recovery.

So Russell Brand here is not just changing one person's life but reaching out with potential to lead other people towards better, happier lives. And in church and in church and in church what does this ripple effect look like?

If we do anything as a church we should try to be a source of God's rippling love out into the world. And I think sometimes here it can feel like it's not very glamorous a cup of tea a bake sale a thoughtful conversation but those things aren't small really.

Really they can make all the difference in the world. For example I actually feel quite emotional about it when I think about all the people involved in the drop-in and just they've created this amazing conversation where people just feel loved and then gradually they feel loved in the drop-in they gradually come to the Monday service where they learn a little bit more about where that love is coming from.

[27 : 17] Or little friends I mean Gemma and Lottie and all the volunteers do an amazing job keeping up with all those mums locally especially when it might feel a bit difficult and they provide a space where people can be real where people can talk honestly and feel encouraged and supported.

Or perhaps you know we think about the role of house group leaders and the way that they look after just a little group of people and make them feel loved sustained in the faith and in relationships or the role of the welcomers on the door who make people feel like this is a building you can come into and someone will talk to you which I don't think everyone thinks is necessarily true when they come to church.

So it's Mother's Day and I know this is kind of shoehorning it in in the end but I'd say following the words of Christ our calling storing up our wealth in the kingdom is to be a spiritual family in a way that's more important perhaps than blood.

A family where everyone regardless of their circumstances is welcome to come and be loved and invited to take part. And I think we're really good at this as a church in some ways.

I mean I think about all the godparents I've never been to a church where adults have godparents before and I love it. It's so nice but it's a kind of spiritual family where we all try and look out for each other try and love each other and ensure that all the people around us are spreading love and encouragement.

[28 : 54] And sometimes that's monetary. I mean I know sometimes when people have hit the wall as a church we do provide cash which is important actually because we care for people that means not letting them starve.

It means being there for them when they're having a rough time. It means encouraging them when they need encouraging and investing in the places where God is speaking to you and leading you.

But this is also about the whole of life. Where do you store up your wealth? And about a vision of spreading love and joy and prioritising God above people and things in all of your life.

Which is I guess ultimately reflecting that amazing nurturing mothering part of God. and I think when we talk about living giving we're saying that includes how you spend your money too.

So thanks. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.