

Joy: The Joy of Giving - 19th February 2023

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Preacher: Matt Wallace

[0 : 0 0] We are in the middle of this Sunday series that we've been doing called Joy, what it means to know the gladness of God with us in all that we go through in life. And so as we continue perhaps this journey in a joy that we've been on in recent weeks, I'd like us please to look this morning at how we might experience the joy of knowing God with us through the way God gives to us and we in turn give to others. So a bit of a giving theme today. To kick off though, we're going to be all traditional and begin with the Bible and dip into the Old Testament first of all, Book of Chronicles. Because I want to kick off with this for reasons which will become clear. It's a prayer that David, King David, the King of Israel at the time makes in front of the crowds in Jerusalem as plans for the temple that was going to be built there are shared. And we're told this in the Book of Chronicles. It says, David, praise the Lord in the presence of the whole assembly saying, praise be to you, Lord, the God of our father Israel from everlasting to everlasting. Yours, Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor for everything in heaven and earth is yours. Yours, Lord, is the kingdom. You are exalted as head over all. Wealth and honor come from you. You are the ruler of all things. In your hands are strength and power to exalt and give strength to all. Now, our God, we give you thanks and praise your glorious name. But who am I and who are my people that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from you and we have given you only what comes from your hand. Now, you might recognize a few words there.

It's basically David acknowledging that everything in this life comes from God and therefore belongs to God. And he's not shy about listing these things. If you remember, he says, greatness, power, glory, majesty, splendor, the kingdom, wealth, honor, strength. You know, everything, as David says, comes from you, God. And this idea of everything being God's, well, it's a theme which runs right away through the Bible, not least in Psalms, for example, where we read this, that the earth is the Lord's and everything in it. The world and all its people belong to him. It's pretty broad, pretty comprehensive, that, shall we say. But then it also, in other places in the Bible, sort of drills down to some specifics as well. So in the book of Haggai, one of the prophets, we read this, all silver and gold belong to me, declares the Lord Almighty. So big picture stuff, creation, it's mine, says God. The world is mine, says God. Everything in the world, including all its people, you're mine, says God. All silver and gold. So the rings on our fingers, the fillings in our teeth, our granny's somewhat surplus selection of souvenir seaside silver spoons, it's all God's, he says. And then this theme, it's not just an Old

Testament one, though. It continues into the New Testament. As the Apostle Paul says in his letter to the Romans, he says this, for everything comes from God and exists by his power and is intended for his glory. Or again, if we go right to the end of the Bible, in the book of Revelation, you get the angels in heaven worshipping God with words that echo that prayer of David's from Chronicles. When they declare this, they say, blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and strength belong to our God forever and ever. And so in some ways, whilst it may not always perhaps be subtle, I guess the Bible consistently hammers the point home that everything is God's and everything belongs to him. And everything means everything. From the planet we inhabit to the homes we live in, the jobs we go to, the hobbies we follow, the qualifications we gain, the money we earn, they're all gods. They're all gods. Now, we might say, fair enough in some ways, but hang on a minute, what I earn, we might think, is down to my effort, you know, my achievements perhaps. And yeah, there is some truth in that. We're not just sort of passive bystanders in all this. But really, even the abilities we have to gain these things, well, they all come from and ultimately belong to God as well.

The Apostle Paul says this kind of rhetorical question, really. What do you have that you did not receive? Implication being nothing, since everything is God's. So the friendships we have, the relationships we're in, the children in our care, they too belong to God. Even the very breath in our lungs. And we sing that in a worship song sometimes. It's your breath in our lungs we sing. So our breath, our lives, they belong to God. Why? Because again, the earth is the Lord's and everything in it, the world, and all its people belong to him. And yet, as I think we probably know, this is not the sort of language, perhaps, that we're used to hearing these days. Because we live in an age where ownership of things is assumed and even championed. So we talk about possession being nine-tenths of the law, don't we? We talk about our stuff all the time. Anything from my coffee to my cat, my coat, my car, my caravan. You know, we long to own, perhaps, our own home if we can. But in light of all these verses, strictly speaking, we own nothing. Indeed, we come into this world with nothing, except our birthday suit, perhaps. And we leave it with nothing. Because, once again, the earth is the Lord's and everything in it. Now, I realize, though, that practically speaking, it's not always going to be helpful for us to say that we own nothing and that everything belongs to God. I mean, try telling that to the tax man, for example. Or if you're stopped, perhaps, for speeding by the police, and the officer asks, is this your car, sir? I wouldn't recommend you say, well, technically, officer, the car belongs to the Lord Almighty. You know, you may get done for more than just speeding, if that's the case. And so, how do we straddle this kind of tension, I suppose, between everything belonging to God, but us having oversight, perhaps, of other things in our life as well? Well, perhaps, the better way to think of things is that, yes, everything does ultimately belong to God, and we own nothing. But because of God's gracious generosity, God gives us everything.

God is the owner, but God is also the giver. Yes, it's all mine, says God, but God is not a hoarder. I'm giving it to you, he says. Everything you have is a gift from me. Indeed, by nature, by character, God is a giver. God gives. And not only that, God is the most generous of givers, because God gives, not just so that we might exist, but that we might flourish in the life he gives us. It says up here, God so loved the world that he gave Jesus so that we might have eternal life, life in all its fullness, as Jesus puts it. Or again, as Paul says in 1 Timothy, echoing that book of Ecclesiastes that we looked at the other week, he says, God richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.

[8 : 40] And it's got that joy word in the middle there, because joy, as we've been seeing, is indeed key, because God loves giving. It's a reflection of who God is, and God's character, and God's love.

All of that, though, is by way of sort of perhaps slightly long-winded introduction, because I think it all begs the question, how then are we to respond to God's generous gifts to us? If everything is a gift from God given by him to us, how are we to respond to God's generosity to us? Well, it suggests, I think, this morning we do well to consider three responses to God's gifts to us, three ways which hopefully build on each other, and which in turn, I think, enable us to know deeper joy in our lives. So firstly, I'd say in response to God's giving to us, we need to be receptive. We need to be willing to receive from God. And we talked about this a bit last week, so I won't major on this one. But I think often we might need to ask God's help to help us to accept that all we have is indeed a gift from God. And I say this because it's harder than we might think to be willing to receive everything from God as a gift. Again, as we said last week, so much of our culture is built around the idea that we earn what we've got, that we deserve it, if you like, we get our reward. And whilst I think God is all in favour of treating people fairly and justly, there's also clearly something in God that delights and takes immense joy in treating us to so much variety and goodness in this life. But receiving the stuff of life as a gift, I think that takes faith, faith that

God does indeed love to give, but also faith that God loves to give to us, to you and to me. For example, with this kind of idea of needing to receive from God in mind, I remember a conversation I had a while back with a woman down at Vic. And we got on to chatting about God, as you do, or as it seems to come my way in there anyway. But I remember she said to me, I don't believe in God, but even if I did, I've done such terrible things in my life that there's no way I'm going to be going to heaven.

Now that's quite a statement to hear, especially over a pint and some pork scratchings and so on. And so as we chatted, and I tried to sort of gently unpack where she was coming from perhaps with her, I think as we spoke, what became clear was two things really. Firstly, it seems she couldn't get her head around the idea that God might love people regardless of what they've done or not done in life. You know, this concept of grace, this concept of undeserved favour that we were talking about last week. It was over her head. It was just a foreign idea to her. But then secondly, and more personally, and she got a bit upset at this point, I think it's also about the fact that she couldn't understand how this God could love her. Really because of what she'd said she'd done in life. And she carried, she told me what it was, and you know, in the grand scheme, it wasn't a deal breaker. Nothing is. But she carried real guilt about that with her. And I think those two points of not really understanding how God could be loving. And secondly, more importantly for her, how God could be loving of her, where they're connected. Because if she couldn't accept that she's loved regardless of what she's done, then obviously she wasn't going to be able to see how others could be loved either.

And the hard thing is, I think, our conversation then, and our various conversations since, I still see her in there occasionally, and often it turns a little bit to God stuff. They've kind of reached a bit of an impasse, really, with her. Because in many ways, a loving, gracious, giving God is the only one who's on offer to her. There isn't this angry, mean God. That God doesn't exist. Only a loving, gracious, giving God. And when I speak to her, I can't really dilute God's grace to make it more palatable or more conditional for her to get her head around. No, she is unconditionally loved by God, whether she accepts that or not. Now, I trust that God's arms are wide enough to eventually draw her in. And we might say, replace her tears of guilt with tears of joy when she realizes the grace that

[14 : 01] God gives. But I think that conversation, and others also, they demonstrate to me that faith, trust, that receiving God's love, and ultimately, this life and all that is in it, as a gift from God.

Well, I guess all of us need help to really comprehend the beauty of that, to take that on board and believe that truth. I think the good news is, though, that no matter how unworthy we may feel, no matter how undeserving of God's gifts we may feel. It's times like communion that we're going to share in a bit, that I'd say offer us a chance to come before God symbolically, but practically as well, with our hands out, and simply receive from him. And indeed, that hands-out gesture, you'll see people doing it in prayer times, in worship times, at communion. You may well do it yourself. It's a kind of hands-out gesture of willing acceptance to God. See, that, I would say, this baseline of being receptive to the fact that God is a giver, well, that's the baseline for us understanding that everything we have is a gift from God. That's the first thing, I think, in our response to a given God, to be willing to receive his love and this life as a gift. But in a second connected response to God's gift is this one, for us to be grateful, finding ways to express our gratitude to God. Now, gratitude is not about trying to do something in return. As you said last week, that makes what we're given a kind of transaction. Remember that kind of present swap idea. They're not gifts. That's a transaction. That's a swap. Doing something in return, that might be a sign that we are grateful, but doing something in return is not gratitude itself. Rather, the splendidly named theologian Miroslav Volf, he puts it like this. He says, faith receives God's gifts as gifts.

Gratitude receives them well. Now, what does it mean to receive gifts well with gratitude? Well, so on the one hand, that's where our worship comes in, saying thank you to God through songs, through prayers, through rituals, through serving others, and so on. Our acceptance of and our gratitude for God's goodness shapes shapes our worship of God. And if you're new to this whole church thing, you're new to the idea of God and faith and stuff, and you don't know where to start, perhaps, with worshiping God, because it's all new to you, then I think gratitude is a great place to start. Start from a point of gratitude, since thanks and praise are kind of two sides of the same coin. You don't have to sing. All you need to do is thank God for something that you know is a gift from him, and the rest will flow from there. But equally, I think, being grateful to God is not just about gratitude for the stuff we've received. In fact, it's about being grateful for the fact, I think, more deeply, that we've been seen by God, thought of by God, loved enough by God to receive from him in the first place. I mean, if you just think about yourself for a moment, your eyes, your ears, your hands are unique. No one else has got the equipment that you've got. No one else has ever or will ever experience or sense this life or this world in the same way that you do. No one else will experience

God in the same way that you do. Your particular combination of talents and tastes that God's given you, they're unique to you, never to be repeated in the same measure by anyone else. And that makes your life, that makes you both unique, but that uniqueness makes you precious and a person of wonder, I would say. Not only does God love you, he loves you personally. He sees you. And that is something to be profoundly, joyfully grateful for. God loves us more than we will ever love ourselves.

And that is mind-blowing when you get your head around that. But then thirdly, and finally, I think here's the outworking of that willingness to receive and that gratitude for God's gifts to us.

[19:12] Because we learn in time to be cheerful givers ourselves. Now, what does it mean to be a cheerful giver? Well, I don't know if you've been watching a TV show, Sort Your Life Out with Stacey Solomon.

I'd really recommend it if you hadn't. It's the show to which families are helped to recycle or sell or donate 50% of their possessions. They clear the whole house out, put them in a big warehouse, and the family go through and cherry-pick the things they definitely want to keep, and they get rid of all the rest. 50% of their possessions goes over the course of a few days. And it's based on this premise that hoarding, having too much stuff, overwhelms our joy, overwhelms our enjoyment of life.

And it leads to this pretty modern problem known as stuffification. You know, we're suffocated by our stuff. Stuffification. And Stacey Solomon, she's a live wire, but she's as wise as the king whose name she shares, I think. Because if you've seen it, she demonstrates how much time and effort and money we waste on things that we don't need or appreciate or have even forgotten we ever had. You know, clothes with the label still in, all that kind of stuff. Sling it, sling it, she says. Get rid.

Recycle. Sell. Give away. Living more simply and buying less stuff, for Stacey Solomon at least, in the program, is the key to domestic joy on *Sort Your Life Out*. And do give it a watch. It's on at the moment. But as good and as enjoyable, perhaps, as that show is, I think it's only really half the story of joy in relation to our stuff. Because whilst being satisfied with less is a great idea, it's actually, I would say, giving away more that is equally key to knowing joy. Can be satisfied with less, yes, but joy comes equally from giving away more. And here's, I think, why that is the case.

See, as we were saying, giving is part of God's nature and character. And God takes delight in us enjoying the gift of this life. And that means that when we give, we're actually doing something godly with our time and our money and our efforts. We're getting in tune with the way God has made us to be. People who are made in God's image, designed to reflect and live in harmony with who God is. Yes, God is loving and patient and kind and all those things, but God is also fundamentally a giver.

[22 : 03] When we give, we reflect God. And that harmony, if you like, that synchronization of our spirit with God's spirit living within us, when we're in sync with God, I think that's one of the roots of joy.

Because joy is all about, as we've been saying, the gladness we have in knowing that God is with us. And we're in sync with God when we give. Again, to quote this Miroslav Volf guy, he says, God's gifts aim to make us generous givers, not just fortunate receivers. And I think that's why it says in Paul's letter to the Corinthians, he says, God therefore loves a cheerful giver. Because God knows that when we give, it brings delight, not just to God, not just to those who receive our gifts, but to us as well, to ourselves. We can be cheerful givers, because giving brings us good cheer. It brings us joy. And I know for me, that's certainly been the testimony of my life, that giving brings joy.

Indeed, I think the most fulfilled, the most prolonged time of joy in my life, and I'm a West Am fan, so there hasn't been much prolonged time of joy in it. But in terms of more profound stuff, even in football, certainly of my time as vicar here, I think the most joyful time I've had was ironically, during lockdown. Because one of the privileges of my job was that pretty much every day, I was giving away food from us as a church, and burnt would be a friend to those who needed it.

You know, as we bought in as a church or received donations of gifts, yes, we received them, and we were grateful. But the actual joy came from giving that food away. You know, even in the midst of so much disruption and illness, I kind of felt a bit weird about this really, but I kind of enjoyed lockdown, a joy in me, a new joy, because giving at its most foundational level gets us to the heart of who God is. And so that's why post-lockdown, I think I'm more passionate than ever about us as a church being as generous as we can with our community and beyond. Because not only is it a good thing to do to bless others, but I know it's key to us being and becoming a joy-filled church. When we give, we receive joy. For me personally, and for Gemma, you know, that's why we give a significant proportion of our income to St. John's, because even though that involves an element of sacrifice on our part, that sacrifice is ultimately worth it, because we not only believe what God's doing here is good, but we know that giving cheerfully brings us joy. And I say that not to boast or anything daft like that. It's all God's money anyway. So how could I boast about giving something away that wasn't mine in the first place? No, I say that though, simply in order to verify that from our own lives, from my own life, it's true what God has already promised us, that it is more blessed to give than to receive. And if you don't know that blessing, if you never really would say you've experienced the joy that comes from giving, then there's no hard sell this morning. All I can say is try it, try it. Step out perhaps in being more generous. Ask God to help you step out in your giving and perhaps giving more than you currently do. Maybe sacrifice something that currently you spend your money on, that in your heart of hearts, you know you don't really need. And see if giving that money away actually gives you more joy than the thing you would have bought. Because I'd almost guarantee you that it will. I know we're in a cost of living crisis. I know times are tight. But I don't think that negates this principle that joy is God's gift when we give from what he has given us.

And if St. John's is your church, then giving to what goes on here is one of the best ways, I'd say, not just to get joy, but to get the joy of feeling involved, you know, to feel part of the journey that we're on with God. Because as we give, and I know so many here do, then suddenly what we do and how we spend our money as a church, it becomes personal to us. It becomes prayerful for us.

[27 : 04] You know, we're a stakeholder. We partner God in what he's up to. But equally, as we give, we receive that blessing of knowing that when we as a church offer something for nothing to people, well, it's your giving and mine from what God has already given us that enables that to happen.

And we'll be sharing details of what's been happening over this past year at our annual meeting, which comes up in April. So yes, we can worship. That's a good thing. Yes, we can pray. That's a good thing. Yes, we can encourage. And yes, we can serve other people. But alongside that, I'd say our giving is just as much a part of our life with God as any of those other ways. Because our giving enables the practical stuff to happen on which the more personal, relational stuff can be built.

And that, I would suggest, is how giving brings us joy. So may God, in his generosity, help each of us to be receptive and grateful and above all, cheerful givers.

Amen. Amen.