

Partners in Giving (Commitment Sunday)■

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Date: 27 November 2010

Preacher: Steve Jeffrey

- [0 : 0 0] As Chris said right at the beginning that there is an agenda tonight and so I'm going to pray about that because it's not an agenda that we like to hear about when you start talking about money.
- So let's pray and commit our time together to God as we open up the scriptures. Father God, we need your help tonight.
- Your word is just so clear on the issue that we are about to look at from your scriptures. Lord, from the words, from the very mouths of the Lord Jesus, he said, What good is it for a man to gain the whole world and yet to forfeit his soul?
- From the mouth of Jesus, he also said that it is impossible to serve both God and money. And yet, Father, we have tried. And Lord, so we need your help to see this issue clearly.
- We need to see what a treasure we have in you and what trifling in comparison it is to have our treasures in this world.
- [1 : 1 8] How much we give up when we pursue things of this world instead of you. Lord, we want to be content and our contentment needs to come from you. And so we ask you, Father, now as we open your word that by your spirit that you might enable us to see and believe and obey.
- Change us, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. A couple of months ago, we had our diocesan mission, sorry, our diocesan synod, sort of like the parliament of the Anglican Church in Sydney.
- And the highlight for me was what they call Mission Hour. And there was a Bible college lecturer there, he might have even been the principal, I think, of a Bible college, I'm not really sure, in Uganda.
- And he was talking about the significant impact that our partnership, that is the partnership of Sydney Diocese, had with this Ugandan college and the Ugandan church.
- I can't remember a lot of stuff that he said. He was certainly enthusiastic and quite funny. But one thing that he did say was he quoted a Ugandan proverb which goes like this.
- [2 : 3 3] If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together. If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.
- And I thought that that is a great summary of this commitment series. This whole commitment series has been tied together with the idea of partnership.
- In fact, it's been titled, the title of it has been Partners for Life. It's in the end about going far together. And today we have Commitment Sunday and it is the climax of the series.
- And what we will see is that as Paul started on the note of partnership, so he ends on the note of partnership. And specifically he ends with financial partnership.
- And so we're going to talk about money and about financial partnership here at St. Paul's tonight. I do that being mindful that Christians have had varying views and attitudes towards money over the years.

[3 : 40] There are those who believe that, in fact, poverty was a sign of being truly Christian. And so many people made vows of poverty, gave away all their possessions.

We won't dwell too much on that level because most of us don't think that's a popular option nowadays. Certainly not in the Western world. On the other hand, many have gone to the opposite extreme and say that God wants you to be rich.

In fact, if you're not rich, then you're clearly not displaying enough faith in God. He's not pushing you enough and you're not trusting him enough. Now, of course, you know, they're two extreme opinions.

And, of course, we can see the failures of the poverty one and we can see the failure of the rich one. You know, we can certainly name people potentially who have taken that to extreme or teachers who have taken it to extreme and said that God wants them to have private jets and luxury cars and fancy hotels and, you know, that sort of stuff.

And, of course, most of us would see that and go, we don't agree with that. Now, that's just way at the other end. That's an extreme. We wouldn't agree with that.

[4 : 50] But it would be good if we came back a couple of steps. And, you know, God wants us to be nicely comfortable. That would be a good Christian position. Because in the end, that's where most of us sit in the Western world.

How do we respond? In the end, we're stuck in the middle there somewhere making excuses and getting confused about money. And so we launch into Philippians 4.

And Paul's got some good stuff to say to us about money. He's got some good stuff to say to us about financial partnership. Let's begin in verse 10. So you need to get your Bibles and open and turn to Philippians 4 if you're not already there.

Verse 10. So Paul takes the opportunity right at the end of this letter to thank the Philippian church for their partnership and their supporting of him financially.

He also tells them something here really interesting in giving thanks to them. He says, I have learned the secret of contentment. Let me say that that is something that our world and dare say potentially all of us sitting in this room right now need to learn.

[6 : 14] We still need to learn this one. A few verses earlier, Paul talks about anxiety. We looked at that last week. Do not be anxious in anything, but in everything by prayer and petition with thanksgiving present your request to God.

And anxiety is a fearful uncertainty about the future. It might be a short-term future or a long-term future. It's a fearful uncertainty over the future. Discontentment, on the other hand, normally arises from ongoing and unchanging circumstances that we can do nothing about.

It's a feeling of powerlessness about circumstances that I don't like. It might be an unfulfilling or a low-paying job. It might be singleness. It might be the inability to bear children.

It might be an unhappy marriage. It might be physical disabilities. It might be poor health. It might be the in-laws. Who knows? I mean, it could be anything, really. Now, I don't want to minimize the pain and the complexities and the difficulties of those issues.

But what the Bible says clearly here is that it is possible to be content in spite of those issues. In any and every circumstance, it is possible to know contentment.

[7 : 31] What then is the secret of this contentment? Notice first what Paul says in verse 12. I know what it is to be in need. I know what it is to have plenty.

I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well-fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. He says, it doesn't matter if I'm wealthy or whether I'm bankrupt.

It doesn't matter if I pass my exams or fail my exams. It doesn't matter if I've got a job or I'm on welfare. It doesn't matter if I'm driving the Mercedes or I'm taking public transport. It doesn't matter if I shop at DJ's or at the \$2 shop.

It doesn't matter. He's saying that his contentment has not got anything to do with his circumstances of his life, the external circumstances.

How then is it possible for him to be content in any and every circumstance? Verse 13. I can do everything through him who gives me strength.

[8 : 32] That's how it's possible for a boy to be content. I can do everything through him who gives me strength. So he says, I've learned contentment in any and every circumstance.

And I can do it because in everything he gives me the strength. Now, it's important not to take this verse out of context.

It's one of those verses which gets thrown around, applied to all sorts of different circumstances of life. You go to Coorong, it's on mugs and all that sort of stuff. You know, it's just one of those things that gets brandished around.

Don't worry, brother. You know, you can do everything through him who gives you strength. I can leap tall buildings through him who gives me strength. I mean, that's not how this verse should be applied. Paul is saying, God strengthens me to be content in any and every situation.

His contentment is wrapped up with God's enabling of him to be content. That is, his contentment is wrapped up in his relationship with God.

[9 : 37] Paul could be content in every circumstance, whatever the circumstance, because he is thoroughly assured that God is at work in and through them.

And therefore, there is a willingness to accept God's hand no matter what it is. Because God disciplines those he loves. God is at work in this situation.

And so there's a willingness to accept God's hand in whatever the circumstance is. As one writer put it, or one person, actually, this little quote, this little prayer, captures contentment so beautifully.

This was a prayer that was written by one Christian man to another Christian man who had just lost his wife. And frankly, if I was in this sort of scenario, I would hope someone would write a similar note to me.

And he said, my friend, pray this prayer. Lord, I am willing to receive what you give, lack what you withhold, and relinquish what you take.

[10 : 50] Isn't that powerful? Lord, I am willing to receive what you give, to lack what you withhold, and relinquish what you take.

It is possible to do all of those things, to receive, to lack, and to relinquish through him who gives me the strength.

That is the secret of contentment. And it is the promise for all Christians. Flick back in your Bibles to chapter 1 where we began. Six weeks ago.

Verse 4. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

What Paul is saying there is that when God starts a work in someone, he finishes the job. God is at work in all the circumstances of life, shaping and directing our lives for our good and for his glory.

[12 : 10] Things will always work out according to God's plan. He's never got his hands off the steering wheel of our lives. He's directing it always.

And so, in amongst all of those issues, in amongst all the difficulties, in amongst all the things that would cause me to want to be discontent, the promise of God and the challenge, I think, for us is in chapter 4, verse 19.

And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus. You see, Paul says that he is content.

He's learnt the secret of contentment. And we too can be content if, like Paul, we trust that all our needs are met in the Lord Jesus Christ.

All of them. You can't do better than that. Money can't meet your needs.

[13 : 18] A relationship can't meet your needs. Significance doesn't meet your needs. And how does God meet our needs?

It says it right there. According to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus. Everything that we need right now for a life of contentment has already been given to us in Christ.

There is, therefore, no excuse. This is such an important promise for us to hear again and again and again and again because we live in a culture that is driving us to a life of discontentment.

it pushes us in that direction. The bottom line is that the accumulation of possessions is where happiness is. I hope you realise that that's what advertising is all about.

Advertising has the state of desire to make you discontent. It wants you to be discontent. Otherwise, how else is it going to sell its product to you unless you think you need this for your happiness?

[14 : 31] for your security? For your significance? They tap into that bit where I need to be happy.

I need to be secure. I need to feel significant. And so the advertising industry drives you towards discontentment. And the consequence is that there is this almost infallible human rule.

spending expands to fill the income. If you make more money, you buy more things.

And the things that you buy have to be stored, insured, or repaired. Or unrepaired. In other words, spending begets spending.

If you have less at your disposal, you spend less. Most of the time we don't even think about it. And we, my friends, have followed the world.

[15 : 41] We have followed our culture. If this is true, if expenses almost inevitably expand to fill the income, how will we restrain ourselves from accumulating more and more stuff?

And not just more and more stuff, but more and more expensive stuff. The answer is that as our income grows, we resolve to give a greater and greater percentage of our income to advance the kingdom.

Let me tell you, that is what puts the brakes on our natural impulse towards luxury. We all have a natural impulse towards luxury.

once upon a time you used to just buy a couch. Now you can buy a couch that becomes your body temperature within seven seconds.

That's impressive. That's the kind of couch I want to sit on in the middle of winter. When we pursue radical generosity, as I'm suggesting we should, it puts a restrictor on our ever-expanding spending.

[17 : 06] And so friends, let me challenge you with the life of John Wesley. Let's pick him as an example. He was one of the greatest evangelists in the 18th century. In 1731, he began to limit his expenses so that he would have more money to give to the poor.

In the first year, his income was 30 pounds and he found he could live on 28 pounds and so he gave away 2 pounds. In the second year, his income doubled but he held his expenses even and so he had 32 pounds to give away.

Equivalent and at that time, equivalent to a comfortable life's income. So in other words, he had two and he had enough income to support two comfortable family lives and so he gave away one.

In the third year, his income jumped to 90 pounds and he gave away 62 pounds. In his long life, Wesley's income advanced as high as 1,400 pounds in a year but he rarely ever allowed his expenses to rise above 30 pounds a year.

He said that he seldom had more than 100 pounds in his possession at any time and this so baffled the English tax commissioners that they decided to investigate him in 1776 insisting that for a man of his substantial income he must have silver dishes that he was not paying excise tax on and so he wrote to the English tax collectors I have two silver spoons in London and two in Bristol.

[19 : 05] This is all the plate that I have at present I shall not buy any more while so many around me want bread. I will not buy another plate to put bread on when people around me don't even have the bread.

When he died in 1791 at the age of 87 the only money that is mentioned in his will are the coins that were in his pocket when he died and the coins in his dresser drawer.

The thing that filled his will was his theological works and his books. He figured someone ought to get those. The rest of it didn't matter. Most of the 30,000 pounds he had earned in his life had been given away and he had not needed for anything.

Should we be surprised by that when God says I will meet all of your needs? And so Paul's attitude towards money here is tied up in his relationship with God.

His attitude towards contentment is tied up in his relationship with God. We also notice that Paul's attitude to money is also tied up in his relationship with the Philippian church. Have a look there at verse 14.

[20 : 36] Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving except you only.

For even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid again and again when I was in need. I want you to notice two words there. Verse 14, the word share.

Verse 15, the word share. Both of those words are the exact same word which in chapter one is translated partnership.

And so Paul begins on the note of partnership in chapter one and he ends on the note of partnership towards the end of chapter four. it's the same word that we use for fellowship, for sharing, for partnership, it's the same word that he has in mind here.

The partnership that he has in mind here is that of expressing the matter of giving and receiving of financial help. This partnership is seen in the willingness of God's people parting with their money, their God given money to help them support gospel ministry.

[21 : 54] is that what comes in mind when you think of the word fellowship? I mean because for some of us it's kind of what we do on the deck over tea and biscuits. For some of us it's what we call the youth group, the youth fellowship.

For some of us it's just the nice feeling of intimacy we have between Christian people. I had a strong sense of fellowship with that person. Now it may include some of those things but when the Bible often talks about fellowship as being a partner that is expressed in terms of dollars and cents.

Maybe that means that we should start using the word partnership rather than fellowship so that we as a church grasp the need to put our money where our mouth is.

So let me give you three things that lead Christian people to part with their money for gospel ministry. Number one, an understanding that your money is not your own. It is God's.

It comes from God's. It's all his. It is purely as John said a gift from God for the glory of his name. Not for your comfort but his glory.

[23 : 06] It is God's gift. You've got your job because God gives you that job. You've got your welfare because God allows the government to have enough money to pay for that welfare and the laws that allow it.

You've got your skills because God has given you those skills. It's all God's. Number two, the gospel itself. When you recognize the enormous generosity of God towards you in rescuing from eternal punishment in hell and giving you all the riches of the Lord Jesus Christ, it moves your heart towards generosity.

Gratitude. Number three, contentment. contentment will lead you to part with money and to give it to others because when you can trust God whatever the circumstances that you find in your life, then you realize that you don't actually have to hang on to your last dollars and cents.

He's in control. My friends, Christ has set us free from the love of money, the slavery to money in order that we might be able to be givers, that we might be generous people and it is so liberating not to be enslaved by the thing that enslaves our culture.

It helps us to get out of the spiral of looking to my needs first, considering my needs before I consider even the needs of other people. So if that is the case, if it is such an enormous privilege, to be involved in gospel partnership in such a way, why is it that churches are nearly always under resourced?

[24 : 53] Why is it that missionaries have to return home because of lack of funds? Why do Christian organisations waste time on fundraisers and fairs and Lamington drives in order just to raise a few bucks to pay the bills?

Why is that? I can only imagine that we have lost the wonder of the gospel and the privilege of gospel partnership. And so what we're doing today is we are putting it out there as we did last year on display that we treasure Jesus more than the things of this world.

Today we are pledging our giving for the next year on the commitment cards and it's not about having a balanced budget for next year. That is not what this is about.

This is about partnership in the gospel here at St. Paul's and beyond. What we want to see is we want to see Christ treasured by more and more people.

And so let me read to you our core value of radical generosity. generosity. Our gifts, possessions, finances and time belong to God. We will therefore use them for his glory and not for our comfort.

[26 : 12] We desire to be like the Macedonians whose joy in Christ through extremely difficult circumstances resulted in rich generosity towards others. We believe that in a world that loves money a lifestyle of radical generosity proclaims that Jesus is our greatest treasure.

We believe that it is the responsibility of all Christians to pay what they owe, support those who teach the word of God, provide faithfully for their family and be generous to the poor and needy and support the wider work of the gospel in the world.

We value sacrificial, enthusiastic, joyful, regular giving in response to the gospel of grace. My friends, when it all boils down, money is a matter of faith for the Christian.

It is not a financial issue. It is a spiritual issue. And the question is, do we actually trust the promises of God? Do we treasure Jesus more than the gifts that he gives us?

In such a way that if he removed all the gifts, I would still be able to say rejoice in the Lord, I say it again, rejoice, because my contentment is in Christ.

[27 : 38] And so I appeal to you some pause to trust God. He will never leave you or forsake you. He will supply all of your needs. And so tonight we've heard an encouraging testimony from John.

God's love. It's great to hear those words. After the 10 o'clock service this morning, I was out on the deck and a lady came up to me who is a pensioner and she said, I was so challenged last year that I too decided to double my giving.

And she said, you know what God did? Gave me two more dogs. And I went, you need to explain that one.

What did you sell the dogs or something? No, she said, I walk dogs. That's how I get some cash. I walk people's dogs for them. And God gave me two more dogs to walk and I was able to meet my commitment.

What a wonderful testimony. A year ago I stood here and I declared that Natalie and I would be contributing \$650 a month to the ministry of St Paul's.

[28 : 55] I did that because 1 Chronicles 29 leads me to do that. I've written about this, 1 Chronicles 29 where King David led the people of God in giving generously to the building of the temple.

And I said then, as I say again now, that I'm the only one who will publicly declare my giving because I am your leader. I want you to know that this issue is one about accountability and so you need to know that I am seeking to put my money where my mouth is.

I'm seeking to lead us in radical generosity as I'm seeking to lead us in all the other core values of this church. Last year, or sorry, this year, this past year has been tough financially for Natalie and I.

for a few months, we lived week by week, juggling the timing of paying the bills and even juggling when we could go and buy groceries. We literally lived week by week.

By God's grace, as much as we were tempted in amongst the course of this year, we did not pull back on the 650 a month. We made a decision that you do not pull back on that, we've got to pull back on the spending instead.

[30 : 10] That's where we pull back. We start cutting stuff out of our life. And by God's grace, we are on track to finish this year better than what we started this year.

And I say it's by God's grace because I've got no idea how it happened. It's not because of my wheeling and dealing or anything else. And in fact, we would say that we're finishing this year better than we can think of in the last five years.

God has done it and he's done it in unexpected ways. Our response to God's generosity to us this year is to pledge \$675 a month next year.

We're going to up it just a bit, but we're going to up it in view of Nat's income decreasing by \$10,000. So we're going to lose money and we're tending to give more. I expect God's going to push us again in this next year, but by God's grace, he will enable us as he says he would to be content in any and every circumstance.

Do you trust the promises of God? I appeal to you, Sir Paul, to trust God. God's love. He will never fail you, he will never forsake you, and the promise is he will supply all of your needs.

[31 : 40] In Christ you have everything you need for a life of contentment. And so my friends, you know my pledge. You know that of the leaders.

I told you last week, \$6,260 a week from the leadership of St Paul's staff and parish council. And so now I call you to follow them into a life of radical generosity.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.