

Generosity

This following text is Jonathan Green's speaking notes from the eight of ten values talks held at The Sanctuary Westminster on 4th May 2006.

Introduction

Tonight I want us to give some time to thinking about this whole idea of being a generous Christian community filled with generous people. Our eighth value is to be: A generous community: generous with our time, money, ideas, homes, love, compassion, trust and patience.

There are two things that I believe are essential qualities of a Christian's life: giving and forgiving.

I think that the whole subject of generosity and giving is wrapped up in a few key ideas:

- Firstly, **everything that we have is given to us...** even our breath is a gift. As a wise priest once said, 'The only thing you have that is truly your own is your sin. Everything else is a gift from God.'¹
- Secondly, throughout the Biblical story, God's calling to his people has been "**I will bless you so that you can be a blessing to the world.**" In other words, we don't hold on to the gifts given to us, yes we benefit from them but they flow through us to those who are in need. We give for the good of the world!
- Lastly, **we see the ultimate gift in Jesus:** The Father gave his only Son for the whole world. Jesus gave up his very life for us so that we can truly live! In a sense then, the generosity that has been shown to us prompts a response: the giving of our own lives to God, as an offering of worship.

Therefore, I urge you, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual (or reasonable) act of worship. Romans 12:1

So I want us to think about the different ways in which we can be generous and offer ourselves as a living sacrifice. I want to open the subject of generosity up beyond just time and money! Generosity is a character trait to be developed for the good of the world. And as we also value creativity and want to develop our creativity, the ways in which generosity can be expressed are almost limitless!

And then I want to get even more practical and see what that might look like here at Methodist Central Hall Westminster, firstly among this growing group – because we will spend a lot of time together and are trying to "do life together", but also out towards the wider church here at MCHW and of course to the wider community of Westminster and London.

But first to money and a Christian perspective on giving

I want us to be a group of people who are able to talk openly about money without getting uncomfortable. Money is a taboo within our society... never ask the question: How much do you earn? We just don't ask those kinds of questions do we! How much debt do you have? Unfortunately it is often the secrecy that surrounds money that causes the problems that can leave individuals and families in dire straits... it is embarrassing to ask for financial help. And of course, because image is so important we are constantly pressured to keep up with the fashions too... after all we are branded consumers, which brings with it, its own unique pressures.

So I would like you to turn into twos and threes and in two minutes simply tell each other:

- 1) How much do you earn?
- 2) How much did you spend on your summer holiday last year?
- 3) How much did you give away to those in need or to the mission of the church?

¹ How much should I give? by *Andy Hickford* in *Christianity*, April 2006, 24-30

(on the night the group didn't know what to do with itself, it was a hoot!)

I was of course only kidding... please don't do that!

But I want us to be able to talk about money in a healthy way. And maybe over time help each other to budget and stay accountable with our money, not in a heavy handed way or controlling way – heaven forbid, but in a loving way and so that the church here may be known as one that is wise with the resources we have.

Few things test a person's spirituality more accurately than the way they use money. You know, the way we handle practical issues like money is an indicator of our spiritual maturity. Money is a very spiritual thing and a great enabler!

Let's think about tithing²

The Bible says: "Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, ... and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it." (Malachi 3:10)

Various streams of the church around the world teach that the giving of 10% of one's income is a direct commandment from God. This is often, but not always, linked to the 'word of faith' theology, which asserts that good health and material prosperity are the rights of every believer, and that monetary giving of at least 10% 'activates' these blessings. Some of the proponents of this teaching are Creflo A. Dollar, who says: "Tithing is a key to unlocking God's blessings on your life. You should tithe to your church congregation, then you'll see God blessing you."³

And Kenneth Copeland: "Tithing activates the blessings of God in your finances."

Tithing certainly does appear as a direct commandment to the Israelites in the Old Testament. The verses outlining its regulation can be found in Leviticus 27:30-34; Numbers 18:19-28; Deuteronomy 12:1-19; Deuteronomy 14:22-29; and Deuteronomy 26: 12-13. It was without a doubt an important law that the Israelites were expected to follow.

There are some immediate and obvious problems though, if we are to take these verses to teach tithing as a command for God's people today.

Tithing was never universal in the Old Testament, only agricultural workers were expected to pay a tithe on the produce of the land - crafts or trades workers appear to have been exempt. Also, it was illegal to bring a tithe of anything not grown on Israelite soil. The poor did not pay it, but instead were given to from the tithe, and no tithe was required every seventh (Sabbath) year.

If we claim that tithing still applies today on the grounds of the Old Testament law, then surely we must apply the regulations regarding the tithe consistently. I am not aware of any tithing church where the members are exempt from giving every seventh year, or where non-agricultural workers are asked not to give!

The problem of consistency does not stop there, either. What about all the other Old Testament commands? As one writer once put it: "I have one neighbor who insists on working on the Sabbath. Exodus 35:2 clearly states that he should be put to death. Am I morally obligated to do it myself? He also blasphemes and curses a lot. Is it really necessary that we go to the trouble of getting the whole town together to stone him?" (Leviticus 24:10-16.)

Then of course there's Jesus! When it comes to Jesus and the law, it can be a bit confusing.

² Most of the ideas in this section is adapted from Andy Hickford's article in Christianity magazine, April 2006.

³Hickford, How much, 24.

Matthew 5:17 says that Jesus came to fulfill the law. Romans 3:31 says that he upholds the law. In Romans 7:6 it says that Jesus released us from the law and in Ephesians 2 Paul writes that Jesus abolished the law! So, just what is the relationship between Jesus and the Old Testament laws?!

The short answer to that question is that Jesus replaces the Old Testament law. In him it is all fulfilled and upheld, because he completes it. We are released from its regulation and condemnation - that means 'He abolished the law.' It means wisdom and history is fulfilled in Christ.⁴

Tithing in the New Testament

When tithing is mentioned in the New Testament - Luke, Hebrews, Matthew and Luke, none of those passages are commands for Christians to tithe...

Andy Hickford says... 'So there it is. Tithing is not biblical as far as I can see. I believe that tithing as a legalistic doctrine can only emerge from poor theology. It isn't helpful, doesn't lead to good discipleship (as legalism never makes for maturity) and is not right before God.'

'However, in writing these words I confess to being worried. I think this teaching should come with its own health warning. Words intended to bring freedom for some, I fear, may only bring further captivity to the majority. You see, most Christians I know don't need freedom from tithing - or even freedom from the guilt of not tithing - they need freedom from consumerism.'⁵

So my question is this: How can we counter addiction to consumerism with the value of generosity?... and how does money work in the context of a church community?

You see, the Christian take on possessions and wealth is that 'it all belongs to God' and we are called to administer it!

God's work first - seek his kingdom first!

God's world is our priority - lots of people are suffering and dying... Just to bring an edge to this talk, let me read you today's reading from the UCB word for today. I haven't read the Word for Today for years but someone passed me a copy and I felt drawn to pick it up this morning. It reads:

"...he passed by on the other side." Luke 10:31 KJV

Kevin Donaldson, President of Mission of Mercy, shares the following statistics: 450 million children worldwide live in abject poverty, existing on less than a dollar a day; 5.7 million of them work under horrific circumstances, including slavery; girls ages 12 or 13, sometimes younger, are forced to provide sexual services to 15 or more men a day; in brothels, these children are told they must pay rent to the owner and it's always more than the child makes from customers; living conditions are horrible; violence is commonplace, there's little or no medical care, and pregnancy automatically means forced abortion; almost 11 million children each year (30,000 every day) die before their fifth birthday, most from preventable diseases; more than three million children under 15 are living with HIV/AIDS about 13.4 million children have lost one or both parents to aids.

'Are you trying to make me feel guilty?' No! But blessing brings responsibility! In the parable of the Good Samaritan Jesus didn't condemn the priest and the Levite for being blessed or busy. No, it was because the "... passed by on the other side," to avoid a wounded man who needed their help. Understand this: when you have all you need, God expects you to show compassion!".... freely ye have received, freely give" (Matthew 10:8 KJV). Come on; open your eyes, your heart and your wallet. Don't stand before God one day trying in vain to explain why you left so much of what He gave you, uninvested in the thing He cares about most; a hurting world.⁶

⁴ Hickford, How much, 27

⁵ Hickford, How much, 28

⁶ Bob and Debby Gass, *The Word for Today* Getting involved! from Thursday 4th May, UCB The Word for Today Summer 2006, 4

The local church is a conduit for our generosity

The local church is a conduit through which we get to make a difference in the world. If you read the values that we have we want to change the world... we want to bring justice to society and to the world... we work out those things here... so we have a vision and people that buy into that vision, resource the vision. I am about to ask for £13k from the church here to support the mission and growth of Sanctuary - one day I would like things to be self financing, staff etc. But that will only happen if people own the vision...

Hickford says that ‘regular, tax efficient giving should be every responsible Christians practice - a spiritual discipline.’⁷

And you know what, I really believe that 10% of our income is a great place to start...

As I was preparing to give this talk I remembered that Brian McLaren had addressed this issue of generosity in his book *A New Kind of Christian*. I find this part to be very moving and a great challenge. Let me share this with you. Neo and Dan are having an e-mail conversation and money comes up:

“I had never gone through anyone else’s personal and financial papers before. It was a strange feeling. One of the things that truck me was Neo’s generosity. His teacher’s salary was decent, but the number of organizations to which he sent money – beginning with a full 10 percent of his gross income going to St. Tim’s, and that was only the beginning – was to me beyond all proportion. Along with the money he sent, it became apparent that he had visited many of the organizations he supported financially; his files were full of personal notes and expense reports from his travels. It was as if he had this secret life going: on the surface, Dr. Neil Oliver, mild-mannered science teacher, but behind the scenes, international philanthropist with connections to an orphanage in Guatemala, a Christian care facility for drug addicts in New Hampshire, a new church being planted in Moscow, a Seattle-based organization trying to liberate children from the most horrible kinds of prostitution in Bangkok, and several more.

I made a remark to him about his financial generosity in one of our e-mail conversations, and I asked him how he could afford to give away so much. He said that when he was very young, in his Brethren assembly back in Jamaica, he had made a vow to God to tithe—give 10 percent of his income—to the church he attended. But through the years he would find himself pulled towards supporting additional charitable endeavors, and so year by year the percentage had crept up. (My estimate was that he was living on about 70 percent of his salary, giving about 25 percent, and saving 5 percent.) He said that giving was one of his greatest joys in life. When I made a comment that I wish I had more people like him in my church, he sent me a long e-mail urging me to preach on giving more, to really challenge people to give, for their benefit, and for the benefit of the world. He knew that I would feel hesitant to do so because it seemed self-serving for a pastor to ask people to give more, but he told me to get over tat. He told me that if he ever went back into the pastorate, he would lose all his inhibitions about talking about money because he felt that generosity was one of the most important spiritual disciplines that greed was one of the soul’s worst poisons. He said that if the new kind of Christianity we had been dreaming about wasn’t radically generous, it was a waste of time. I responded by saying that it seemed like an overstatement to me, but he was adamant: “We live in the most affluent culture in the most affluent period of human history. If we can’t discipline ourselves to learn the joys of generous living, I think we’re an embarrassment to the gospel.”⁸

⁷ Hickford, How much, 28

⁸ Brian McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian*, 112-113

Well let's move on: Let's think about time: which is quickly slipping through our fingers

Again this is a very complex situation... you know I hear a lot in church about 'oh I don't have time...' I am so busy with work...

It is very interesting when you ask people to tell you how they spend their time... when you dig a bit deeper, they need a couple of evenings in with the TV and one down the pub.

Sometimes it is clear that others are simply really bad at organizing their time. But whatever the scenario, time is a very precious commodity and the way we spend our time reveals a lot about our priorities!

I hope that giving your time by coming along to The Sanctuary here in Westminster helps people to thrive! To live a full life! It should be fun!

Serving really helps us grow as Christians!

Now we need a good structure to do this in, we certainly don't want to do people harm!

Mary had a little lamb,
'Twas given her to keep
But then it joined the Baptist Church
And died for lack of sleep.

Now I grew up in a Baptist church – my Grandfather was a Baptist minister for 40 yrs. I speak from experience... you know the mantra – raise them up and burn them out.

It is really important to me that:

- People don't burn out doing church activities.
- Leaders don't abuse peoples generosity.
- People always have a get out clause... because people are more important than doing things... and the world won't end if we let things go...
- Thankfulness accompanies generosity!

Important

As for the rich of this world, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on uncertain riches but only in God who richly furnishes us with everything to enjoy. They are to do good, to be rich in good deeds: liberal and generous, thus laying up for themselves a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life which is life indeed.

1 Timothy 6: 17-19 RSV

So here is my suggestion

The Sanctuary is a central part of the mission and ministry of Methodist Central Hall Westminster... maybe we could see the Sunday services as a great opportunity to give back to MCHW... Now of course this is an invitation not a command – an opportunity to give back!

Some of the ways we can give...

- Fair trade stall – we might like to do a shop in the future and a fashion line, but right now...
- Enthusiasm, we are young and have energy, our enthusiasm for God is a gift to the church that we should give. Timothy urges young people to be an example.
- Support/encouragement
- Cakes, why not help Beryl with cakes. As the church continues to grow we will need more food. I have tasted some of your food! Maybe help serve teas and coffees so that more people can be served more quickly on a Sunday morning so people stand in a queue and sit down instead.
- Welcomers/greeters – that way we can invite young adults who come along to join us...
- Stewards
- Cresch, YPF, JC Life
- Money

Within Sanctuary we need help as we continue to grow

- Setting up venues
- Refreshments
- Time
- Money
- Ideas
- Open your homes to one another
- Love and compassion
- Trust and patience
- Give our friendship to one another
- Pray and commit to working out our core values
- Support
- Offer skills you may have

Jesus gave his all for us and in response...

My Grandmother is one of the most generous people I have ever met – I have been on the receiving end of her generosity many times – she always says to me: ‘It is more blessed to give than receive.’ I really believe her and have found that to be true... try it out sometime!

Many of you are already accomplished givers and very generous! Encourage others to be so. Model generosity to the world!

Giving should not be done in a contrived way or out of guilt, but should be a really natural way of life... part of our personality that we invest in and help grow... and it is for the good of the world!

You know, when it comes to generosity, some people stop at nothing. Let us not be like that but let us be known as people who give.