

A Generous Theology

Introduction

There are more bible verses on money, wealth and possessions (2,450) than anything apart from love, with four times more than on faith or prayer. Jesus warns explicitly about the danger of focusing on wealthⁱ, as does Paulⁱⁱ. 16 of the 38 recorded parables are about money and possessions. One of our challenges is that, whilst we as a church often hate talking about money, Jesus never stopped. Giving is not adiaphoron (neither forbidden nor commanded by scripture), but wholly integrated within our discipleship, our following of Jesus, and our desire and calling to be Christ-like. Generosity is a hallmark of a lived-out faith and a testament to itⁱⁱⁱ.

With so many references to money in the Bible, it is sometimes hard to see the wood for the trees. So, in this short paper I will explore some of the passages that I find particularly helpful.

Firstly, God calls us to be generous in response to his generosity^{iv} and to share his generosity with others^v. Mission has been described as the overflowing life and love of God. It's a wonderful description, conjuring up an image of love as living waters, cascading down, swirling around and through us into our communities, and God gives us his gifts to enable this to happen. God does not see *our* money or *our* possessions as *ours* but as *his*^{vi}. We receive God's gifts and are called to sensibly manage them^{vii}. As the Methodist Covenant Prayer puts it:

*"Let me be full,
let me be empty,
let me have all things,
let me have nothing:
I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things
to your pleasure and disposal."*

The Greatest Commandments

In Mark 12 Jesus is asked what the greatest commandment is. The man who asks is a "teacher of the law", so he knows his stuff – but although he may know his stuff, does he know what it means? Jesus says:

³⁰ Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.^[f] ³¹ The second is this: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'^[g] There is no commandment greater than these."

The teacher of the law's response suggests he does have a pretty good idea what it means:

³² "Well said, teacher," the man replied. "You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. ³³ To love him with all your heart, with all your

understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbour as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

And then Jesus acknowledges the teacher’s wisdom and says:

³⁴ “You are not far from the kingdom of God.”

What a wonderful thing to say. You’re not far. Keep going, you’re on the right lines. Love God with all your heart, with all your understanding, with all your strength. Love your neighbour as yourself. That is what matters, far more than what we give as offerings. Love completely.

Later on, in the same chapter, Jesus rams home the point in case the disciples missed it first time around:

⁴¹ Many rich people threw in large amounts. ⁴² But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a few cents. ⁴³ Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. ⁴⁴ They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on.”

The original Greek says “she has put in her very life”. God doesn’t have a calculator where he tots up our generosity, he looks to our hearts. How much are we loving him, and loving the community around us? To do that requires a generosity of spirit, freely giving of ourselves and what we have. Some translations of the fruits of the spirit in Galatians 5 – “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” - use the word ‘generosity’ instead of ‘goodness’. Generosity is itself a spiritual gift, a gift from God.

The Look of Generosity

But what does generosity look like? The bible shows that God’s generosity is wonderfully reckless. When Jesus turned the water into wine, that was equivalent to 700 bottles of wine^{vii}. Enabling the entire village to get merry is funny and points to reckless generosity. The manna from heaven^x is similarly generous, as is the feeding of the 5,000^x – there is always more than people need. Jesus commends Mary’s generosity when she anoints his feet with perfume that cost a year’s salary^{xi}, and Zacchaeus for giving half his possessions away^{xii}. The ultimate generous act was, of course, God giving his son^{xiii}. God’s generosity is extraordinary generosity.

The Challenges of Living Generously

How do we achieve the kind of generosity we are called to? It is not at all easy. Whilst, yes, we know in one sense that everything is God’s, in practice it is really hard to live in our culture with that attitude – we live in a world which tells us we are what we earn and what we own. That is quite some way from Mary who, after anointing Jesus’ feet, Jesus said would be known not for what she had, but by what she gave away^{xiv}. There are also many, many enticing ways to spend ‘our’ money. There are huge social

pressures and expectations over what we should buy and how we should live. We also live in a time where many in our society struggle with debt, and where tiny houses come with huge mortgages.

To add to the challenge, it's not just us that then forgo things in order to live generously, but it may also be our partners, our children, our wider family and friends. We need to have a shared understanding with our loved ones of what generosity we are being called to, and that in itself can be hard to discern and agree.

Our relative wealth can also make generosity harder. The more we have, the more our lives can revolve around it – the greater time we spend managing it, the more opportunities and demands it places on our finite lives, and it can also buy us lives that are more and more separated from others.

Living a Generous Life

To live a generous life, we need to break that cycle. We can do this by slowing down, and by intentionally and purposefully focusing on God and our community. It is this attentiveness that enables us to really see how we can love and care for others, it is in the noticing that we can become generous. Spending time in prayerful contemplation enables us to notice God and his heart, and to see and accept what he wishes to do through us.

To live a generous life is itself a generous gift from God, for we cannot do it on our own. We may well feel the sickening lurch in the stomach as we see where we currently are, and where God is calling us to, and despair of ever making the leap from one to the other^{xv}. We realise afresh that to be the generous people he calls us to be is an act of his grace, it is through him giving us the spiritual gift of generosity that we can live the generous life he is calling us to.

Similarly, it is also an act of grace that enables us to love our neighbour as our self.^{xvi} We should, as the Quakers so beautifully put it, “Attend to what love requires of you^{xvii}”. But this love needs to be a brave love, because we need courage to live a different life, one that others may not understand, or which seems at odds with how others see life should be lived.

Mary's act of generously anointing Jesus' feet points us to the fundamental truth of living a generous life – it all stems from her relationship with Christ. It is that relationship that inspires and shapes the generosity, and her generosity is in response to it. “We love God because he first loved us”^{xviii}. The more we discover God's love for us, the initiator of the loving relationship we have, the more we love in return. We cannot live generous lives because we feel we ought to. We live generously because we cannot help it. Our lives have been transformed by the love that first loved us.

Jonathan de Bernhardt Wood
National Advisor for Giving and Income Generation

ⁱ Luke 12: 29-31 “And do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it. For the pagan world runs after all such things, and your Father knows that you need them. But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well”.

ⁱⁱ 1 Timothy 6:10, 17-19 “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.... Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.”

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 6:21 “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

^{iv} 1 Thessalonians 1:6; 2:14 “We are generous because God was first generous to us, freely giving His life for our sakes. As followers of Christ, we seek to imitate the one who gave Himself for us.”

^v Mark 10:21 “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

^{vi} 1 Chronicles 24:19 “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”.

^{vii} 1 Peter 4:10 “Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms”.

^{viii} John 2:1-12

^{ix} Exodus 16: 1-35

^x Matthew 14: 13-21

^{xi} John 12: 1-8

^{xii} Luke 19: 8-9 “And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, “Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded any one of anything, I restore it fourfold.” And Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham”.

^{xiii} John 3:16 “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son”

^{xiv} Mark 14:9 “Truly I tell you, wherever the good news^[a] is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her”.

^{xv} Mark 9:24 “Immediately the father of the child cried out,^[a] ‘I believe; help my unbelief!’

^{xvi} Galatians 5: 14 “For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’”

^{xvii} Advices & Queries, no. 28

^{xviii} 1 John 4: 19