

## 2 Corinthians

### *Sermon notes*

Background notes on  
four passages in 2 Corinthians



introduction	3
.....	
week <b>one</b> <i>The overflow of Grace</i> 2 Corinthians 8:1-9	7
.....	
week <b>two</b> <i>Fair Shares</i> 2 Corinthians 8:10-15	11
.....	
week <b>three</b> <i>The Administration of Grace</i> 2 Corinthians 8:16 - 9:5	15
.....	
week <b>four</b> <i>Sowing and Reaping</i> 2 Corinthians 9:6-15	19
.....	

## 2 Corinthians Introduction

*Paul wants to grow mature, obedient givers not extract one off gifts from emotional givers*

In Galatians 2:1-10 Paul tells of a visit to Jerusalem at which he met Peter and the other 'pillar apostles'. In closing, Paul notes his warm agreement with their one request that he 'remember the poor' (Gal. 2:10). This, in all probability, is the origin of a financial offering to the impoverished church in Jerusalem that Paul undertook in the mid-50s AD. Strangely perhaps, in Acts 24:17 Luke makes only a passing reference to the offering but Paul mentions it again in 1 Corinthians 16:1-4 and Romans 15:22-28 and it is treated extensively in 2 Corinthians 8-9. The offering was immensely significant to his apostolic ministry and teaches much about the relationship between money and the gospel. One scholar has described Paul's collection as 'an illustrative model of his theology'.

For Paul, preaching the gospel of Jesus was everything, so why would a *financial* collection be so important to him?

### **The purpose of the Jerusalem offering**

Paul Schervisch speaks of the *demand* and *supply* sides of fundraising. The demand side is familiar to us through street collection tins, TV adverts and events such as Comic Relief: the need we see or read about 'demands' our response. Good fundraising, says Schervisch, blends the demand with the 'supply side' of fundraising, the *motivation* of the donor to give, the passions that move the donor.

This distinction between supply and demand helps us to understand Paul's approach in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9. The financial basis of the Jerusalem church may have collapsed as a result of persecution, or possibly the economic strain of caring for the widows and orphans, or the experiment in sharing goods in common in Acts 2:43. Whatever the reason, the need in Jerusalem that demands a response was very real, although Paul never actually says what the need is.

Now this need never disappears from view but Paul's main emphasis in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 is upon the 'supply side' of the equation. Paul wants to grow mature, obedient givers, not extract one-off gifts from emotional givers moved by the plight of people far away. For Paul, the collection is more than a charitable act but a sign, even a sacrament, of mutuality between churches, between Jew and Gentile, between apostle and churches.

- The context in which Paul was urged to 'remember the poor' concerned the acceptance of gentile Christians without circumcision and defining areas of missionary responsibility. Caring for the poor through the collection can hardly be an unimportant or unspiritual matter.

*the offering was about much more than money; it was about relationships in the church.*

*practising generosity was vital to the spiritual growth and maturity of the Corinthian church*

- For Paul, the offering was a symbol of the unity of Jew and Gentile in Christ, an area in which Paul had experienced much tension. The offering was about much more than money: it was about relationships in the church.
- Underlying this is Paul's own understanding of the relationship of Jew and Gentile. In Romans 15:22ff he says that it is right for Jerusalem to be blessed by the financial gift because the *spiritual* wealth of the Jerusalem church has blessed the Gentiles. The collection underlined the Jewish roots from which the Christian church grew.
- Some Old Testament passages pictured the Gentiles bringing gifts to Jerusalem in the Messianic age. Paul may have understood this collection in that way and as a sign of the final conversion of Israel and the end of the ages.

### **Paul and the Corinthian church**

Initial enthusiasm in Corinth for the Jerusalem offering had faded (2 Cor. 8:10-12). There were internal problems in the church around sexual morality, food offered to idols, spiritual gifts and the nature of the resurrection. In addition, a group of 'false apostles' questioned Paul's status as an apostle and money was at least one factor. In 2 Corinthians 12, Paul angrily defends himself against suggestions that he had taken financial advantage of anyone in Corinth. There is a key lesson about stewardship here: giving is always dependent upon the quality of relationships in a church. People do not just give, they give to something.

### **Paul and patronage**

From 1 Corinthians 9:3-15 we know that Paul believed that it was right *in principle* for an evangelist or apostle to receive financial support, although Paul himself chose to make his own living as a tentmaker. But, on leaving a city, Paul he was happy to receive gifts to resource his preaching somewhere else (Phil. 4:15-18). Paul's practice contains an important lesson about the nature of giving. Those blessed spiritually by faith in Jesus should share the blessing with others and that included financial sharing. The Greek word for 'send' in 2 Corinthians 1:16 has the meaning of giving practical help.

But this principle by which Paul lived may have caused him problems in Corinth. In the culture of his day wealthy people would act as patrons to others, say an artist. They gave money and in return those receiving patronage would honour the patron in their words and their work. If honour was not given then the person who received the patronage was shamed. It may be that in refusing patronage and by working for a living Paul offended some key leaders in the Corinthian church. Whatever the situation money became an issue between Paul and the Corinthian church. So why not just let the money sensitive matter of the Jerusalem offering drop? The offering was important to Paul's apostolic ministry and he also knew that practising generosity was vital to the spiritual growth and maturity of the Corinthian church.

*Paul never uses the word "money" but a range of deeply religious words, notably grace*

*to preach from 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 is not to preach about money in isolation but about discipleship and grace.*

Paul had already written briefly about the Jerusalem offering to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 16:1-4). The Greek word Paul uses there to describe the collection (*logeia*) is a financial word meaning a voluntary payment. There is no sense of any compulsion and Paul's advice on the collection is practical and businesslike. In 2 Corinthians 8-9, Paul's tone could hardly be more different. He is affirming, sensitive and encouraging, well aware of the need to tread gently with his audience. And in the two chapters, Paul never uses the word 'money' at all. Instead he uses a range of deeply religious words, notably grace (*charis*), to describe the collection. He appeals to the grace of God demonstrated in the generosity of the poor among Macedonian churches and to the grace of Christ in his incarnation. He draws on the Old Testament story of the manna in the desert as a new economy where the greedy do not profit and the vulnerable do not go without. Finally, Paul promises a rich harvest of blessing from a generous sowing in giving.

The need of the Corinthian church to give to Jerusalem, to complete what they had started and to share the blessings they had received was every bit as important as the need of the Jerusalem church to receive their financial gifts. Giving is crucial to our own spiritual growth and maturity. It is for Christians the overflow of grace; more than just giving back, it is being caught up in the gracious giving of God himself. One of the blessings of giving is our own freedom and release. Philanthropist Henry Drucker puts it like this:

In this act [of giving] we disentrall ourselves by overcoming our slavery to possessions. We demonstrate that there are values in the world more important to us than our own selfish aggrandisement. True giving is an act of self-liberation. It becomes one of the major achievements of our life.

To preach from 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 is not to preach about money in isolation but about discipleship and grace.

### **Understanding 2 Corinthians**

We know from Paul's own writing that he sent four letters to Corinth and some scholars have argued that 2 Corinthians is actually a compilation of Paul's letters. How else, they say, can we explain the change in tone and approach from the optimistic and affirming chapter 9 to the combative and defensive tone of chapters 10-13, which may be the 'tearful letter' of 2 Corinthians 7:8? Again, having written about the collection in chapter 8, why does Paul start over again in chapter 9? Perhaps chapters 8 and 9 are in fact two letters, the second written to a wider group of Christians in Achaia rather than in Corinth.

Certainty is not possible but the position taken here is that 2 Corinthians is a unity as it stands. There is no textual evidence for different letters, and the words Paul uses and the themes he addresses are found throughout the whole letter. In this his most personal letter and one intended to be read out loud to the churches,



Paul uses the public speaking techniques (called *rhetoric*) from the law courts and public speech to defend himself against opponents who would deny his apostolic credentials. The apparent mismatch of chapters 8 and 9 and the defensive tone of chapters 10–13 is, arguably, due not to a compilation of letters but to a sustained piece of rhetorical argument.



### 2 Cor 8:1-9

(NIV)

*We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints— and this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us, so that we might urge Titus that, as he had already made a beginning, so he should also complete this generous undertaking among you. Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking.*

*I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.*

### Suggested readings

Exodus 35:1-10, 20-22a ■ Matthew 26:6-13

Paul's opening phrase, 'We want you to know...' is used elsewhere in his letters to introduce a significant new subject. The subject is money and Paul starts precisely at the point where we in our day lose confidence! Our anxieties around preaching and teaching about money often turn on the perception that people are giving all they can, that there is little more to give. Paul by contrast tells the Corinthians about the sacrificial giving of the church in Macedonia. Amid poverty and persecution their gift is beyond what they can afford (*para dunamin*). Why does Paul do this? It surely makes him vulnerable to the kinds of disclaimer with which we are all too familiar: 'our situation is much worse than theirs'. We can suggest two answers.

First, here Paul uses a rhetorical device termed *syncretism*: a public speaker would stimulate healthy competition between people or cities by pointing to the achievements of the other. Many churches will know the power of a visiting speaker sharing stories to enlarge our sense of what is possible and break down the insular parochialism that can beset a parish. Likewise, fundraising professionals know the value of those first 'lead gifts' that kick-start a campaign and encourage others to give.

Paul is happy to use Macedonian generosity to challenge Corinth to finish what they started (2 Cor. 8:10-12) but appeals to them for a more profound reason. He does not talk about the money they gave but about the grace (*charis*) that was given to them and which made their sacrificial giving possible. Indeed, the financial weakness in Macedonia underlines their generous response as an act of grace.

In fact, *charis*, grace, is the keyword in this whole passage and appears five times in verses 1-9. This offering is not simply fundraising for money but an act of grace. In verse 7 he invites the Corinthians who were proud of their spiritual gifts to abound or excel in 'this [act of] grace' (*en tautē tē chariti perisseuēte*). All spiritual gifts are a gift of grace and, here, Paul, quite without embarrassment, puts an invitation to give financially alongside those charismatic, spiritual gifts of which the Corinthian church was so proud. Paul is not concerned simply to raise money but to change the way the Corinthians think about money.

Paul begins by pointing to God's grace among the Macedonians; he ends this section by pointing to the grace of Jesus, 'who though he was rich yet for your sakes became poor so that by his poverty

*giving is being  
caught up  
in the flow  
of God's  
gracious giving,  
being caught up  
in grace*

*it is in the very nature  
of the grace to which  
Paul appeals that he  
could not command  
such a response.*

you might become rich' (verse 9). The gracious giving to which the Corinthians are invited is a reflection, and indeed a part, of the gracious giving of God in Christ. The model for financial giving is the gracious self-giving of Jesus. If we have been saved by grace, then all we have is gift. In 1 Corinthians 4:7 Paul, puts it succinctly, 'What do you have that you have not been given?' Living generously is the overflow of grace.

In verse 4 the elaborate phrase 'begging us with many pleadings' (*meta pollēs paraklēseōs deomenoi hēmōn*) describes the Macedonians' request to take part in 'this service to the saints'. The use of *koinōina* in this verse is interesting. It can mean 'fellowship' but also means partnership with and participation in something. The Macedonians were not reluctant partners but churches wanting to be part of this act of grace, to participate in something that God was doing.

Here is a key truth about fundraising and stewardship. We often feel like beggars pleading for money, embarrassed for fear of upsetting people. But in truth the invitation to give is an invitation to share in a cause and to participate in the outpouring of grace in our lives and in the life of the local church. The gracious gift of the Macedonians, and our own giving, are a work of God's grace made concrete in our financial offering.

It is for this reason that Rowan Williams points out the limitations of the language of 'giving back to God' as a description of giving. It has a biblical basis in the well known prayer of David in 1 Chronicles 29 ('all things come from you and of your own do we give you') and is fine as far as it goes. But giving is more than simply giving something back to God, calculating what amount or even percentage is acceptable. Giving is being caught up in the flow of God's gracious giving, being caught up in grace. The sacrificial giving of the Macedonians is in the nature of sacrament; it speaks in outward form of an inner grace. Paul does not want the Corinthians to match the Macedonians euro for euro, but to let grace flow through them and to share in its generosity.

Accordingly, in verse 8, Paul is clear that he is not commanding the Corinthians to do anything. Had Paul tried to command a response, he would have trampled on the tender relationships between him and the Corinthians. More than that, however, it is in the very nature of the grace to which Paul appeals that he could not command such a response.

Paul's boldness in addressing the sensitive issue of money teaches us not to be hesitant in talking money in the church. But we also learn from this passage about *how* we talk about it. Budgets, appeals and techniques all have a legitimate place but are all to be understood in the richer context of grace. Financial giving is a participation in the grace of God, as is the giving of time and talents. The giving of the latter does not absolve me of responsibility for generous giving.

But for all the stress on grace, both the money and the need are



*what we do with  
our money is a test  
of the depth of our  
discipleship*

*"We can  
give without loving,  
but we cannot  
love without giving"*

important. Grace and participation in the gracious giving of God are the motivation to give but the need is the context of that giving. People do not and will not give into a vacuum. Paul speaks of grace but it is a grace modelled by the Macedonians' generosity to a cause in Jerusalem so well known that it needs no further explanation. In addition, later verses tell us that Paul had already sent three brothers ahead of him to prepare the collection and we must surely assume that part of their message was to speak movingly about the needs of the Jerusalem church.

Financial discipleship has two points of reference: the motivation of grace and a clear and compelling need that must be addressed. Interestingly, in Romans 12, Paul lists among the charismatic gifts 'meeting the need of others'. As noted above, Paul cannot command their response (2 Cor. 8) but he is clear that what they do in regard to the collection is a litmus test of the grace operative in them. What we do with our money, perhaps more than any other aspect of our lives, is a test of the depth of our discipleship and our experience of grace.

### Stewardship reflections

The geographical map of Israel shows the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea joined by the Jordan River, which rises in the far north. Galilee is teeming with life, fed by the spring of the Jordan in the north and feeding the Jordan as it flows south. By contrast, the Dead Sea is just that – dead. Water flows in but stagnates; it has no outlet because it is below sea level. This is a picture of the dynamics of grace. What flows in must flow through us. If grace has no outlet, it stagnates and dies. We have received freely; to live we must freely give.

Amy Carmichael writes, 'We can give without loving, but we cannot love without giving'. The message of giving for Christians is not about a few drops more from unwilling congregations but an exploration of the riches of grace. God is the giver of all and in Christ Jesus we see his self-giving. The grace of God is a spring, a waterfall, an overflowing of abundant supply; when we give, we are caught up in the flow.

### Leaders

To talk about money is not to request us to push a hard-pressed budget even harder, or to make a little more space for charity. To talk about money is an invitation to share in something God is already doing. When we give, we share God's grace. The challenge to our leaders is to see giving not simply as giving back something but being caught up in the giving of God. The challenge is not how much I give but how much of me is in my giving. For Jesus, the giving was of all that he was and all that he had to give, that we might become rich.

*giving is a litmus test  
of faith*

### **Planned givers**

Paul could not and would not command the Corinthians to do anything but he was clear about one thing. What we do or do not do with our money is a test of the reality of our faith, our commitment and our experience of grace. Giving is a litmus test of faith. It was Martin Luther who said that we need three conversions: of the heart when we know God loves us, of the mind as we learn to think as Christian people, and of the purse. He comments that, if faith has not touched our purse or wallets, then it is likely that it has not adequately penetrated either the heart or the mind.

### **Plate givers**

Paul had fallen out with the Corinthians and they had patched up their friendship. Why does Paul risk disturbing the peace again by talking money? Because what we do with our money says a lot about our hearts. Jesus said it himself: 'where your heart is, then treasure is also'. As Billy Graham says, a chequebook is a theological document; it tells what you believe in. My chequebook is a checklist of my priorities. Every cheque in my cheque book is crossed so the money goes where I want it to go. Does our chequebook need a different cross so it reflects God's priorities in my life?

### 2 Cor 8:10-15

(NIV)

*And in this matter I am giving my advice: it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something— now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means. For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have. I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. As it is written,*

*'The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little.'*

*The stewardship challenge is to help people connect the emotional response to need with nurturing obedient planned giving*

### Suggested readings

Exodus 16:9-21 ■ Matthew 6:25-34

In one sense, dividing the text at verse 10 is a little artificial. Paul's intention to offer advice here is paralleled by his verse 8 statement that he will not command the Corinthians. But verse 10 does mark a shift in Paul's thinking. Paul does here what stewardship in the church must do: connect that grace which is our motivation to give with the practical context in which our giving takes place.

Paul does not deny the good heart and the good start of the Corinthian church. The Greek behind the phrase 'you who began last year ...' (*hoitines*) has the feel of 'You were the kind of people who...'. But the task was not finished. Partly this is human nature. Our initial emotional response is not always translated into action, while emotional giving cannot be sustained without a decision to give in a regular, planned way. The stewardship challenge is to help people connect their emotional response to need with nurturing obedient planned giving. And the situation was made worse by deteriorating relationships as false apostles questioned Paul's apostolic credentials and his financial probity.

We touch here on two important points. The first is that giving is always very sensitive to the quality of relationships and pastoral care within the local church. Second, money can be actively withheld as well as given. What is received as grace and gift can be an expression of power or even patronage. Stewardship always has a context and is dependent upon a matrix of social relationships, pastoral care, decision-making and vision, or absence of vision, in the local church. We cannot ignore the local context.

For Paul, a willing heart and the completion of what was started are both essential. In verse 11 he brings together the elaborate expression, 'your eager willingness' (*hē prothymia tou thelein*, literally 'the readiness to be willing') with the verb 'complete' (*epiteleîn*) commonly used for the performance of a religious duty. Stewardship is an affair of the heart before it is an affair of the wallet. The ready willingness to give is what makes the gift acceptable (*euprodektos* – v12) for God is looking for people who know what they have received as the motivation for their giving. But giving is also about completion, the translation of willingness into action.

Paul also adds a qualifying thought; we give out of what we have (*ek tou exein*), not from what we do not have. Now Paul is making a significant theological point here, not providing excuses for those

*stewardship cannot  
be divorced from the  
lifestyle choices  
we make*

*Paul is teaching  
reciprocity at the  
heart of giving*

who say they have nothing to give! Giving is out of the gift we have received, not from what is left over when we have satisfied all our lifestyle choices to the best of our ability. His comments here complement Paul's earlier teaching (1 Cor. 16:2) as well as OT teaching (Deut. 16:10, 17; see also Tobit 4:8). The Greek philosopher Aristotle's comment is also interesting:

...liberality should be evaluated on the basis of one's capital. It is not determined by how much is given but on the basis of the donor's disposition, which gives in proportion to capital.

(*Eth. Nic.4.1.19*)

If our lifestyle is out of control, if our financial management is undisciplined or our giving is not one of our priorities, then there will be little left over from which we can give. Stewardship cannot be divorced from the lifestyle choices we make any more than from the economic circumstances in which we find ourselves. We note in passing here that Paul never offers the tithe as a standard of giving and we cannot assume its knowledge given his gentile audience. The principle here – arguably a tougher ask than a fixed amount – is a willing heart and a decision to give a proportion of income. The tithe is an outworking of that principle: too much for some, appropriate for many, too little for others.

In verse 13, Paul introduces the idea of 'fair shares' or 'a fair balance' (*isotēs*). It is on this biblical principle of mutuality and blessing that the system of parish share or common purse on which ministry of the Church of England are based is founded. On the one hand, Paul assures the Corinthians that no one is having an easy time at their expense. On the other hand, Paul makes it clear that any financial generosity from the Corinthians will be returned to them from Jerusalem (v14). The return is not money: there were other churches, not least the Macedonians, who needed such gifts more. In Romans 15:27, Paul is quite clear that he is talking about *spiritual* blessings.

Paul is teaching reciprocity at the heart of giving or, to put it less elegantly: when we give, we get something back. This is far from the self-centred calculation of a prosperity gospel but contains an important stewardship principle: giving releases spiritual blessings. This is true not only for the individual but also for the church. God's grace is generative of life and community; sharing in his grace is generative of new life both in us and through us in community. To be sure, this is not just about financial giving. However, so much of our personal security, happiness and identity are tied up with our money that discipleship and obedience in this difficult area of our lives can be fundamentally liberating.

To illustrate fair shares Paul alludes to the OT story of manna in the desert. Those greedy enough to attempt to collect too much cannot hold on to their surplus while those unable to collect all they needed do not go short. God is the giver of all that the Corinthian church has.

*stewardship is not about giving to the need but about our needing to give.*

*stewardship asks much harder questions about how much we keep and how we spend it.*

*Stewardship is not about giving to the need but needing to give.*

Paul challenges them to put fair shares into practice by sharing their surplus with Jerusalem and receiving the blessing in return. The abundance of God's provision makes possible a dynamic sharing of grace. Where material blessing is needed, it should be provided and a spiritual blessing will result. The spiritual blessing in return for giving is as much part of the economics of grace as is the obligation to extend to others the grace we have received (Matt. 18:21-35).

### Stewardship reflections

Paul teaches in verses 1-9 that our motivation to give is the grace of God; the need to be addressed is the poverty of the church in Jerusalem. Between motivation and need are factors that can easily short-circuit the connection. Deteriorating pastoral relationships, lack of vision and loss of focus on the needs to be addressed all hinder effective stewardship. So too does ambiguity or a lack of realism as to the nature of the need. Paul was careful to link giving to what was possible, to proportional giving. We each need to be willing to ask, and leaders need to answer, the question, 'What do you want me to do?' We need to provide occasions and opportunities for people to give as well as nurturing the need and desire to give.

### Leaders

All too often our giving is determined by the need of the church we support, sometimes accurately perceived, often not. This is appropriate but is only half the story. Stewardship is not about giving to the need but about our needing to give. Our need to give is greater than the need of the church to receive our gifts. Giving is an invitation to invest in God's economy of giving and receiving. Or, to change the imagery, being caught up in the flow of God's gracious giving. White-water rafting is an exciting experience. We can stay at the side of the river and paddle hard or can paddle into the flow of the water and be taken by its power and use our skill to navigate the river and enjoy the experience. There is a blessing in giving that we can find only when we leave the safety of the bank and get caught up in the flow.

### Planned givers

Is our giving out of what we have been given or what we have left over? Is it proportional to our income or to what is left over at the end of the week or month? In truth, there will always be too much month left at the end of the money! The story is told of the man whose decision years ago to give a tithe, 10% of income now, seemed to be a lot of money given a significantly increased income. Seeking spiritual advice, he was disturbed to hear his vicar pray for a decreased salary so that he could continue to afford to tithe! Stewardship is a challenge not because it asks hard questions of how much we should give away but because it asks much harder questions about how much we keep and how we spend it. The seductive nature of money and possessions means that we will never

be entirely comfortable with those questions. However, it is the decision to give that breaks this cycle.

### **Plate givers**

How much should I give? It is an important question but to answer it we might also need to ask, 'What stops me from giving?' For Paul, a breakdown in personal relationships hindered the completion of the collection. He needed to assure the Corinthians that they were not being taken for a ride by others. What hinders us from giving? Do we understand the needs of the church? Have we always assumed that the church is a rich organisation? Is there an ambiguity about how much we should give or are there clear guidelines for us? Are we exercising power by withholding our giving? Or have we simply never thought about it before?



### 2 Cor 8:16 - 9:5

(NIV)

*But thanks be to God who put in the heart of Titus the same eagerness for you that I myself have. For he not only accepted our appeal, but since he is more eager than ever, he is going to you of his own accord. With him we are sending the brother who is famous among all the churches for his proclaiming of the good news; and not only that, but he has also been appointed by the churches to travel with us while we are administering this generous undertaking for the glory of the Lord himself and to show our goodwill. We intend that no one should blame us about this generous gift that we are administering, for we intend to do what is right not only in the Lord's sight but also in the sight of others. And with them we are sending our brother whom we have often tested and found eager in many matters, but who is now more eager than ever because of his great confidence in you. As for Titus, he is my partner and co-worker in your service; as for our brothers, they are messengers of the churches, the glory of Christ. Therefore, openly before the churches, show them the proof of your love and of our reason for boasting about you.*

*Now it is not necessary for me to write to you about the ministry to the saints, for I know your eagerness, which is the subject of my boasting about you to the people of Macedonia, saying that Achaia has been ready since last year; and your zeal has stirred up most of them. But I am sending the brothers in order that our boasting about you may not prove to have been empty in this case, so that you may be ready, as I said you would be; otherwise, if some Macedonians come with me and find that you are not ready, we would be humiliated—to say nothing of you—in this undertaking. So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to go on ahead to you, and arrange in advance for this bountiful gift that you have promised, so that it may be ready as a voluntary gift and not as an extortion.*

### Suggested readings

2 Chronicles 1:7-12 ■ Luke 12:13-21

In 8:1-9, Paul identifies grace as motivation for Christian giving. In 8:10-15 he links motivation to the practical, contextual outworking of the giving challenge and stresses mutuality and blessing in giving. Now Paul turns to address two important issues: accountability and advocacy. The first, when badly handled, can short-circuit the connection between the presenting need and the motivation to give; the second, when present, can significantly strengthen the connection. Stewardship is at one and the same time a most human and divine business.

Paul's concern for integrity in handling the collection is summed up in the lovely phrase 'the administration of this grace' in verse 19 (*en tē chariti tautē tē diakonoumenē*). What a rich summary of the ministry of a treasurer's and finance committees! Paul is careful to ensure that no one can criticise the way the collection is administered, so he appoints three men above reproach to manage the offering. Titus is a partner and co-worker of Paul (v23) who is close to the Corinthians (2 Cor. 7:6-7, 13-15). He has zeal (*spoudē*) for Corinth, the same word found in verse 8 about the Macedonians in making their contribution to the collection. Titus is going to Corinth 'of his own accord' and the single Greek word here, *authairetos* is used in verse 3 of the voluntary nature of the Macedonian gift.

The first unnamed brother (which some traditions identify as St Luke) has a reputation in the church and also a representative function, because appointed (*cheirotoneōtheis*) in verse 19 implies a show of hands, a formal method of appointment. Both the unnamed brothers are described as apostles of the churches and 'the glory of Christ'. Any idea that money is a secular, inappropriate concern for Christians is dismissed by how Paul speaks about the offering and the men he appoints to manage it.

Paul makes high claims for men accompanying a financial collection but the stakes are high. Financial probity, public accountability and transparency are required in verses 19-20 because, in managing the offering, these men are handling the things of God. Such financial probity is foundational of any Christian ministry. The Billy Graham organisation has stood the test of time because, in a culture of love offerings, TV evangelists and affluent lifestyles, Billy Graham drew a fixed salary, never accepted special offerings and the organisation publishes full accounts after each mission. In the local church, financial accountability and openness are always at a premium. Careful ongoing thought needs to be given to this matter.

*Leaders should never distance themselves from either financial needs or their own commitment to give.*

Paul stresses this godly accountability in verse 19, declaring that administration of the collection is to 'the glory of God himself' (*tēn autou tou Kuriou doxan*) – the use of himself (*autou*) adding special emphasis. Interestingly, Paul then adds the awkward phrase *kai prothumian hēmōn* – loosely translated as 'and our goodwill' in the NRSV. This is the same word used in verses 11 and 12 of the willingness or readiness to give. There is a parallel in 8:5, where Paul notes that the churches in Macedonia gave themselves to the will of God and then also to 'us', Paul and his companions. This collection is not just a whim of Paul but an apostolic act discerned as such by the churches.

So, while accountability matters, the three brothers also seem to serve as *advocates* of the collection. The brothers have passion for both the cause and for the Corinthians, the relationships to make this passion effective and the confidence of Paul himself. Paul will not plead the poverty in Jerusalem as an emotional means of releasing money from a reluctant Corinthian church. The brothers come to Corinth not as beggars pleading for money but as advocates of the apostolic and strategic importance of this offering: an offering from gentile churches to the Jewish mother church. We can, of course, only guess, but did the brothers speak with passion about the plight of Jerusalem, of the special place of Israel in the history of God's dealings with humankind, of Macedonian generosity and Paul's apostolic desire and urging for the Corinthians to be part of it?

The passage would suggest that clergy and the leadership of the church in particular need to be clearly and unambiguously identified with stewardship in the local church. It must be a personal commitment born out of their own discipleship. Leaders should never distance themselves from either financial needs or their own commitment to give.

Chapter 9 may represent the start of a new letter or simply a new train of thought for Paul. He uses the rhetorical device known as *paraleipsis*: he denies that he wants to talk about something and then does just that. The heart of verses 1–5 is verse 5. Paul wants the collection to be a gift, not something 'grudgingly given' or 'something wrung out of you'. Now these two phrases loosely translate Paul's word *pleonexia* in verse 5. Normally *pleonexia* means *greed* and is used this way in the manna story Paul has already quoted in chapter 8. So Paul may be contrasting generosity with a greedy love for money. However, in 2 Corinthians 12:17-18, *pleonexia* is used when Paul denies taking financial advantage of the Corinthians. So *pleonexia* used here in verse 5 may mean that Paul is contrasting a freely given gift with one that has been extorted from them, presumably by Paul himself. This would explain Paul's reluctance to order the Corinthians to do anything (8:8), his giving of advice only (8:10) and the double use of *authairetos* (8:3 and 8:23), which stresses the voluntary nature of the collection.

Whichever way we read verse 5, Paul wants the collection to be a gift. The Greek word here is *eulogeia*, literally 'a blessing' and

*Generous giving is borne from a heart touched by grace, but the midwife is planned giving.*

*leaders must give **generously** before they ask others to give generously*

*It is worth asking what honour and shame might mean in financial terms for today's church.*

Paul may be making a play on words. In 1 Corinthians 16:2 Paul has used a common financial word for a collection, 'logēia'. But in 2 Corinthians 8–9, Paul deliberately avoids using any financial words at all to describe the collection and so uses *eulogeia*, which is used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament to describe gifts (Joshua 15:19; 2 Kings 15:15).

In our modern-day language, Paul is talking about a free-will offering. The only compulsion can be the imperative of grace itself, the need to give in order to be caught up in the flow of that grace. It is in the very nature of grace and of blessing that it cannot be compelled from outside. If by force of personality and apostolic authority Paul could have commanded a response, he would have obtained a gift but would not have grown and nurtured a generous giver.

How then does Paul ensure that the collection is truly a gift and not grudgingly given? Paul begins verse 5 by piling up verbs with the *pro*-suffix in verse 5: 'to go in advance' (*proelthōsin*), and 'prepare in advance' (*prokatartisōsin*) the gift 'which you pledged' (*proepēngelmenēn*). Generous giving is born from a heart touched by grace, but the midwife of generous giving is planned giving. Regular planned giving avoids the embarrassment and the grudging resentment of last-minute collections. Paradoxically, it is the discipline of planned giving that releases the joy and spontaneity of giving and which makes the difference between generous giving and a reluctant gift.

So we see that the three brothers are not sent by the archdeacon to collect arrears of parish share! Paul wishes to avoid a last-minute scabbling for funds because this is as corrosive of relationships as it is of generosity. At worst, financial problems promote resentment, mistrust and damaged relationships. And we should note carefully here the critical place for leaders in the modelling and promotion of stewardship within the congregation. Leaders must give generously before they ask others to give generously.

Finally, we note in passing the language of honour and shame drawn from the relationship of a patron and a client in Corinth. The willing participation of Corinth in the offering is to their honour; their failure to complete what they started is to their shame. It is worth asking what honour and shame might mean in financial terms for today's church. Is it not shame that churches in wealthy areas are less generous than poorer congregations? Is it not shame when churches that could meet all their financial needs and with money to spare are crippled because of low levels of giving?

### **Stewardship application**

Stewardship must assume financial integrity but those charged with financial responsibility are administering grace, not watching the money. Stewardship is never about pleading but invitation; not fundraising but funding ministry. Those who administer grace must recognise that they are handling the things of God, supporting the

*Is our giving realistic to sustain the ministry of church to which we belong?*

ministry of the church and are themselves advocates, or otherwise, of that ministry.

### Leaders

When we give we are participating in grace and handling the things of God. Would the way we plan our giving, the way we prioritise it and actually do it stand up to scrutiny? Is *where* we give a conscious and considered decision? Is *how* we give as businesslike and careful as the way we handle other financial priorities in our life? Is *what* we give an accurate reflection of what God has given to us? In short, does the way we handle our money give glory to God; does it bring honour or shame to us?

### Planned givers

The grace of God always has an address, a place where it happens, people who are identified with it. So we must ask ourselves some hard questions. Is our giving realistic to sustain the ministry of the church to which we belong? When did we last review our giving? Does our giving keep track with our changed circumstances? Is it a priority on my expenditure? Is our gift planned in advance, free of reluctance, compulsion, greed? If we routinely give larger amounts elsewhere and plead this as a reason for not giving much to the church, are we bold to ask ourselves then why the local church is so far down the league table of our priorities? Why is it perceived as so undeserving?

### Plate givers

This passage poses two challenges. The first is to be aware of the financial needs and situation of our church; if we do not know, then whom can we ask to find out? The second is the challenge to begin to plan for regular giving, through envelopes or by standing order. It is a commitment that blesses both the giver and the church that receives the gift.

### 2 Cor 9:6-15

(NIV)

*The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. As it is written,*

*'He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures for ever.'*

*He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God. Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others, while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!*

### Suggested readings

1 Kings 17:8-16 ■ Mark 4:1-20

In this section, the culmination of his teaching, Paul consciously urges generosity on the part of the Corinthians. It is a generosity to match the grace-filled giving of the Macedonian church, though actual comparison is no longer the issue. There is here no limiting of the gift to 'what you have' (8:12) or assurances of fair shares (8:13). Instead there is an appeal to generosity founded on a promise that God will abundantly supply their needs and so provide the ability to be generous. He has already hinted at this in 9:5, describing their gift as 'a generous gift' and he now explores it further. He makes three essential points: the sower, the seed and the harvest.

### The Sower

In verse 6 Paul may be alluding to Proverbs 22:8 and 11:25 or may be simply quoting a contemporary and lost proverb and certainly the imagery of sowing would be familiar and obvious enough in its application to the Corinthians. One who sows sparingly will of necessity reap a sparse harvest. By contrast, sowing bountifully will produce a rich harvest. The Greek word here is *eulogeias*, meaning literally 'with blessings'. This is the same word Paul uses in verse 5 to describe the financial gift, while the use of the plural is intended to denote abundance. The decision to give and to give freely and gladly to the collection is akin to sowing a seed that will produce an abundant crop at harvest time.

The conclusion Paul draws is straightforward – we need to decide how much we shall give. The English translation 'decide' reflects, first, Paul's use of 'heart' (*kardia*), which in ancient thought is the seat of decision-making not of emotion. In addition Paul uses the verb *proērētai* (another *-pro* prefix verb; see the week three notes on 9:5), which emphasises the planned nature of this giving. Paul then asserts that this giving should neither be sorrowful or born of necessity but the actions of a cheerful giver. The Greek word for cheerful is *hilaron*, from which we get our word 'hilarious'. Now anyone who counts the collection at the average parish church will know that some people's giving is hilarious – but that is not quite what Paul had in mind! Nor is this the familiar parental instruction to a child, '...and do it with a smile on your face'. Two things need to be considered. The first is that the decision to give lies with the individual. Paul has consistently underlined that there is no compulsion beyond the obligation of grace itself. Second, as we explored in 9:1-5, the nature of planned giving makes possible a



*The emphasis is upon  
the heart of the sower  
not the promise of the  
harvest that is reaped.*

*contentment  
gives us the **freedom**  
to be generous*

sustained and joyful response. It is last-minute scrabbling for funds that breeds resentment and joyless giving.

The way Paul uses this farming imagery is crucial. The emphasis is upon the heart of the sower, not the need to be met nor the promise of the harvest that is reaped. We need to distinguish between the gift and the giver. Pressing financial need puts the gift itself at centre stage. But mature fundraising and biblical stewardship is always about nurturing the giver and this is Paul's focus here.

Now sowing is always a sowing into some field and the ministry of the local church is one of the fields in which we are to sow. Church leaders must become more skilled in presenting the financial needs of the church in terms of ministry and lives changed rather than the survival of an institution. It is precisely at this point that unhealthy comparisons are made with parishes next door paying less share, or alleged failures of pastoral care or wrong decisions by the PCC.

### Seed

Verse 8 develops the farming imagery further. It is God the abundant provider who provides the seed we scatter. Paul's language trips over itself trying to express this abundance of God as he links 'abound' (*perissuein*) used earlier in chapter 8, with the pregnant phrase 'in all things, always, everywhere' (more powerful still in the alliterative Greek phrase *panti pantote pasan*). Any sparse sowing is not for want of seed, but for want of trust in the heart of the sower or the desire to hold on to what has been given. But in the economics of grace, to hold on to what we have is to receive little blessing in return. God's provision means we will have enough to live and enough to give and share in every good work.

All of which begs the question – how much seed do we need? The clue may lie in Paul's use of *autarkeia* in verse 8. This carefully chosen word was used by the ancient philosophers called the Stoics to describe their quest for 'self-sufficiency'. Stoics wanted to reduce their need to depend on externals, upon other people. In mainstream Greek thought, the word came to be used of having enough to live on, a pre-condition of human freedom. Paul has his own take on this word. It means contentment in Philippians 4:11 and here God's abundance is not given so that we can live adequately but so that we can be generous in every good work. Contentment gives us the freedom to be generous; to be self-sufficient is to have the freedom to give not the freedom to hoard, to retain and to possess.

Mature stewardship is a liberating experience: receiving with gratitude and gladness, sharing with generosity and finding contentment and enjoyment in what we have. To not have enough to live, whether in the absolute terms of third-world poverty or the relative poverty in this country, is an offence to God's purpose in creation and should be challenged with all means at our disposal. It is precisely this that Paul is addressing through the collection, lest we lose sight of its purpose. The abundance of God's giving is not a



*Stewardship is  
inextricably linked  
with spirituality*

*God is the giver of  
all that is needed not  
only for living but for  
generous giving*

green light to the accumulation of riches but an invitation into the economy of receiving and giving that is at the heart of the kingdom of God. Stewardship is inextricably linked with spirituality and is never reducible to how much I can get away with giving.

We should also note that the obligation to extend and share grace through our giving rests upon all Christian people, whatever their personal circumstances. They must make an appropriate response for themselves. We must never assume on behalf of others that they cannot afford to give and so deny access to the economy of grace by failing to nurture generous givers.

### Harvest

What is the harvest that giving reaps? Clearly we cannot exclude financial blessing because this is precisely what the Jerusalem Christians would receive. But to find in these verses a crude promise of financial reward for speculative giving is to miss the entire point of Paul's teaching. Copernicus first taught the medieval world that the sun is at the centre of our galaxy and not of our world. We need, as Methodist minister Dan R Dick says, a Copernican revolution in our understanding of giving. That which is truly life giving, the glory and grace of God, must be at the centre of our lives and we must find our proper orbit around that life-giving grace.

Paul is clear that the two results of faithful obedient giving are first the expression of praise and thanksgiving to God in verse 13 and, second, the prayers and longing for the Corinthians from the Jerusalem church. (Note that the 'they' of verse 13 is the Jerusalem church not the Corinthians as suggested in some English translations.) In Romans 15: 27 Paul is quite specific that, as the Gentiles share in the spiritual blessings of the Jerusalem church, so Jerusalem should share their material blessings. In brief, this is the economy of grace. God is the giver of all that is needed not only for living but for generous giving. As we give, so we reap spiritual blessings in which words like joy, freedom, contentment and obedience are all central.

The collection to which Paul devoted so much of his apostolic energy and longed for the Corinthians to share was a material sign of some healing of the split with Paul, of their identification with other churches and recognition of the unique place of the Jerusalem church within the history of salvation. Paul ends with a heartfelt ascription of praise and glory to God, who is both the source and the goal of life-giving grace.

### Leaders

The tough question is: how are we sowing – richly or reluctantly? The promise in this passage is that God will multiply what we sow back to us in everything –spiritual blessing, the gift of contentment, of peace of heart and mind. The challenge is that we need to sow before we can reap. There is a domino effect in giving: when we learn to give,

precisely because money is so close and important to us, it releases lots of other areas of our lives. Are we ready to put God to the test, to trust his promises?

### **Planned givers**

A second tough question might be: Which field are you sowing in: your field or God's? We cannot separate money from lifestyle. If all that we have is sown in the field of our own personal choices and satisfaction, then we miss out on the blessing twice. Once because no matter how much we sow in our own field, it will never be enough. Second because there will be so little left to be sown in God's field and therefore so little spiritual harvest to be enjoyed.

### **Plate givers**

Michael Green tells a story of mercenary soldiers fighting in the Crusades and needing to be baptised but keeping their sword arms out of the water! It conjures a mental image of us being baptised, holding our wallets and purses out of the water: 'Lord, please not this as well!' Paul said that deciding to give, to be involved in the collection, was a test of the faith of the Corinthians. I can give my time and my talents to the ministry of the church but the acid test is whether I will give my money as well. In truth, those who give most generously will give of all three together, in proportion to what God has given to them.

# *Sermon notes*

Background notes on  
four passages in Luke's Gospel



Introduction	3
Season of Giving	5
Week <b>one</b>	6
<i><b>The Rich ruler</b></i> Luke 18:18-30	
.....	
Week <b>two</b>	10
<i><b>The Rich Fool</b></i> Luke 12:13-21	
.....	
Week <b>three</b>	14
<i><b>Zacchaeus</b></i> Luke 19:1-10	
.....	
Week <b>four</b>	18
<i><b>The Widow's mite</b></i> Luke 21:1-4	
.....	

### Introduction

*The sharing of possessions in Acts is not simply a description of what happened but a theological statement of how things should be*

*'Luke consistently talks about money – but he does not talk about money consistently!'*

It is often said that there are over 2000 verses on wealth and possessions in the Bible. A good percentage of those verses are found in the gospel of Luke for wealth is one of his key themes. By a rough count of verses something like 11% of Luke touches directly on wealth and possessions. When we look at the material that is unique to Luke the theme of wealth is even more sharp in focus.<sup>1</sup> Only Luke tells us of the generosity of Zacchaeus, the barns of the rich fool, the tension between Dives and Lazarus at his gate and the worldly wisdom of the shrewd manager. Where Matthew records, 'blessed are the poor in *spirit*' Luke's version not only says, 'blessed are the *poor*', he also adds 'woe to you rich'! Luke, like Matthew, uses Mark's account of the preaching of John the Baptist as his source material. However, only Luke records the advice given to those who come for baptism (Luke 3:10-14) which are explicit instructions about sharing possessions and earning income in a moral manner.

### Sharing possessions

Also interesting is the treatment of wealth and possessions in the book of Acts. Luke presents a picture of the early church holding possessions in common - and of those who pretended to do so. Yet a reading of later parts of the Acts story and the epistles indicates that individual Christians also retained some private property. Indeed this mirrors the practice in the Essene community at Qumran where property was both shared and retained. The sharing of possessions in Acts is not simply a description of what happened but a theological statement of how things should be. Indeed the later chapters of Acts lose the emphasis on sharing and have a much greater stress on almsgiving (9:36, 10:2, 4, 31, 11:27-30, 20:35 and 24:17).

### Perspectives

As Luke T Johnson observes, 'Luke consistently talks about money – but he does not talk about money consistently!' Unlike Mark, Luke casts the command to the rich ruler to sell his possessions and give to the poor as a specific command to an individual. Yet the same command is also given to all disciples (Luke 12:33) and is reflected in those passages which portray a renunciation of personal possessions (5:11, 14:33, 18:28-29). Luke records Jesus' teaching that the poor, not the poor in spirit are blessed (Luke 6:20) while adding also 'woe to you who are rich for you have already received

*Jesus' shared meals are sacraments of fellowship which blur the social distinctions between rich and poor and also serve to sustain the poor.*

*Christians are called to meaningful and practical discipleship around their wealth and possessions.*

your comfort' (Luke 6:24). Yet this judgement on wealth and the command to divest oneself of all possessions stands in contrast to those women of substance whose giving supported Jesus' own ministry (Luke 8:1-3) and his evident use of the homes of his followers (4:38-39). Levi throws a party *after* he had left everything to follow Jesus (Luke 5:27-30) while Zacchaeus is commended for giving away just half of his wealth (Luke 19:1-10). The command to lend money (Luke 6:34-35, Matt 5:42) assumes, of course, that we have something to lend! The point is not that Luke's gospel is self-contradictory on the subject of money but that following Jesus faithfully around money is much richer than giving away our possessions.

### Sharing meals

A key theme in Luke is the meal fellowship that characterised Jesus' ministry. In the Greek/Roman world of his day meals were commonplace, serving to cement social ties and build reciprocity. Not all who attended such meals would be social equals. The Younger Pliny is careful to note that despite the inequality of guests at his meals everyone is served the same quality of wine contrary to the practice of some to serve wine according to social status.

Note that in Luke Levi gives a 'great banquet' for Jesus (Luke 5:27-32) while the meals in Luke 7:36-50 Luke 10:38-42 are unique to Luke and there is no Synoptic parallel to setting the Pharisaic woes the meal-setting of Luke 11:37-54 or the eating references of 13:26 and 14:15. Key parables unique to Luke contain meal references: the lost sheep (15:1-6), the lost coin (Luke 15:7-10,) and the prodigal son which concludes with a feast while Zacchaeus repents in the context of a meal.

For Luke, Jesus' shared meals are sacraments of fellowship which blur the social distinctions between rich and poor and also serve to sustain the poor. (Luke 14:1-14). His point is that the gospel requires that discipleship recognises the temptations of wealth and the social divisions that inequality of wealth creates. Christians are called to meaningful and practical discipleship around their wealth and possessions. The precise shape of that discipleship is not proscribed but it is characterised by generosity which celebrates justice and not simply personal piety.

---

<sup>i</sup> Luke 1:51-53; 3:10-14; 6:24; 8:1-3; 10:1-16; 10:38-42; 11:41; 12:13-21; 14:12-14; 15:8-10; 15:11-32; 16:1-9,14; 16:19-31; 17:28-30,32; 18:9-14; 19:1-10; 21:34-36; 22:35-38



## Seasons of Giving

It is possible to approach this sermon series by viewing each passage through the lens of the four seasons. These sermon notes do not explore this angle but it is the approach is reflected in both the bible study, *Seasons of Giving*, and also in the all age resources which accompany this preaching series. It offers a new perspective on these well known passages and allows them to speak afresh to us.

**Autumn:** this is the season of change. Life does not stand still, nor do our dealings with money: a new job or a lost job, a baby or children leaving home, a bereavement. Each change can mean that, like the rich ruler in Luke 18, we may hear a new word of God which does not deny past faithfulness but calls us to deeper discipleship and a new challenge to the place of money in our lives.

**Winter:** this is the hard season of cold, of life lying dormant and little obvious growth. So we ask, 'what is it that make generosity hard for us?' 'What are the things that hold us back from giving more than we do?' For the rich fool in Luke 12 there was a coldness of heart, no acknowledgement either of the God who gives all we have nor the needs of those who live in the community around us, or indeed half way across the globe.

**Spring:** this is the season of new life, of promise and in this season we can ask, 'what prompts us, moves us to generosity?' For Zacchaeus in Luke 19 Jesus' self invitation to his home was a springtime of the heart as he responded to grace with generosity and a desire to get his financial house in order

**Summer:** this is the season when nature is at its richest and we ask, 'what does good giving look like?' For a poor widow in Luke 21 giving in the place of worship meant a sacrificial giving which challenged even the outwardly generous giving of the wealthy and which challenges us to proportional giving but also to justice and righteousness in all our dealings with money.

Viewing these passages from the perspective of the seasons was inspired by a beautiful modern day parable from perhaps a rather unlikely source. Oscar Wilde's short story, *The Selfish Giant*, explores generous living as the seasons reflect the heart of the giant who first protects and then shares his garden having encountered a small child who many years later he will meet again.

This story and accompanying resources are explored under the tab *The Selfish Giant* in the Annual Review strand of Giving in Grace at [www.givinginGrace.org/annual-review](http://www.givinginGrace.org/annual-review) . Please note that this material will be available early in 2014. For information and advice prior to that date please contact: [webmaster@givinginGrace.org](mailto:webmaster@givinginGrace.org).

### Luke 18:18-30 (NRSV)

#### The Rich Ruler

*A certain ruler asked him, 'Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honour your father and mother."' He replied, 'I have kept all these since my youth.'*

*When Jesus heard this, he said to him, 'There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.' But when he heard this, he became sad; for he was very rich. Jesus looked at him and said, 'How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.'*

*Those who heard it said, 'Then who can be saved?' He replied, 'What is impossible for mortals is possible for God.' Then Peter said, 'Look, we have left our homes and followed you.' And he said to them, 'Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not get back very much more in this age, and in the age to come eternal life.'*

### Suggested readings

Dt 15:1-11 ■ 1 Tim 6:3-10

**The rich ruler is the only person in the gospels to turn down a direct invitation to follow Jesus. The story connects discipleship and wealth in a powerful and uncompromising manner.**

Although we talk of 'the rich, young ruler' the gospel writers describe him differently. In Matthew he is denoted as young only after his first introduction. In Mark he is simply a man. Here in Luke he is a 'certain ruler'. In all three gospels we do not actually know he is rich until after Jesus challenges him to give his wealth away.

Like Mark, Luke places this story immediately after Jesus command to the disciples to 'suffer the little children' like whom we must all enter the kingdom. The faith of a child and her entry into the kingdom is contrasted with the struggles of the rich to meet the challenge of discipleship. The ruler comes to Jesus with a central concern about future salvation: the phrase 'eternal life' in verses 18 and 30 frame the whole story. However, one who seeks future salvation is challenged to live out that salvation in the present and with reference to the difficult area of money and possessions.

While using Mark's version Luke edits the story to emphasise the ruler's wealth and also to make the story less personal, allowing him to make a more general point about wealth and discipleship. Luke completely omits Mark's account of a man running up to and falling down before Jesus and also any reference to Jesus loving the man. Instead, Luke's account starts with his status as a ruler. The Greek word 'archōn' carries negative connotations in Luke (1:51). He may have been a magistrate but the word is often linked to synagogue leadership (8:41, 49; 13:14) and his own religious claims suggest he was a religious ruler. The man addresses Jesus as 'teacher'; (see also 10:25 and 12:13) but it is the epithet 'good' that is challenged by Jesus. In asking, 'why do you call me good?' Jesus is not making a theological statement about himself but possibly simply pointing out that God is the only ground of salvation. However, it may be that the epithet reflects social convention by which the ruler seeks similar affirmation in return from Jesus. In the context of little children entering the kingdom appeals underwritten by wealth and status can have no substance.

The ruler both knows and keeps the commandments; the story infers nothing else. The commentators' note that the commandments recited by the ruler contain significant differences between the three

*The issue...is not the intrinsic evil in wealth but its gravitational pull. There is something about generous giving that frees us from that pull.*

*The challenge in this story is both to relinquish the claim of wealth on our lives in order to be free to follow Jesus and to meet the needs of others.*

gospels. In Mark the form of the commands is different to the Greek translation of the OT (known as the Septuagint). Luke follows Mark's wording but he inverts the order of the first two commands and he completely omits the fifth command in Mark. Matthew does the same as Luke yet he also uses the Greek OT form of words which Mark does not use.

The significance of this is that the form of the commands mentioned by the ruler may reflect some very early teaching or catechism of the church. There may well be similarities of language between this passage and the sharing of wealth in early church. *Diados* in v22 and *ta idia* in v28 are found also in Acts 4:32-35. Each of the commands touches upon *relationships* within the community of God and help us understand Jesus challenge to the ruler to give away all his possessions.

To the commands of the Law Jesus makes an additional requirement: sell all you have and give to the poor. Luke again reworks Mark's text. He loses Mark's opening instruction, 'go' and places the word 'all' (*panta*) emphatically at the start of the command. He also changes Mark's 'give to the poor' for the word 'distribute'. It may also be significant that Luke omits the phrase, 'if you would be perfect'. He may be wishing to avoid the notion that discipleship around money and possessions belongs to a higher or different calling than ordinary discipleship - as indeed it has been so understood sometimes in the history of the church.

For Luke, here as elsewhere (12:32-34 and 14:33), the giving away of wealth is for a purpose: to give alms to the poor. Such a purpose reflects the concerns of the OT law (Ex 23:11, Dt 15:1-11) of the prophets (Amos 5:11-27), wisdom literature (Prov 14:31; 19:17) and is coherent with Jesus own ministry manifesto (Lk 4:16ff). The issue, as noted elsewhere, is not the intrinsic evil in wealth but its gravitational pull. There is something about generous giving that frees us from that pull. Giving to the poor helps us to re-engage with others and such engagement with people is what is required if we are to be free to join this new company of Jesus' disciples.

The challenge in this story is both to relinquish the claim of wealth on our lives in order to be free to follow Jesus and to meet the needs of others. Freedom to follow, generosity and compassion help build the relationships that are at the heart of the new community of Jesus disciples. In Luke some disciples are called to total renunciation, others to use their wealth wisely. No distinction of merit is drawn between the two.

Interestingly, Mark tells us that the ruler turned away or went away sad and therefore Jesus addresses his words about the difficulty of the rich in entering the kingdom directly to his disciples. But Luke does not mention the walking away. As with the command to give everything away so here also the rich ruler is addressed directly by Jesus the second person singular. However, because Luke has lost Mark's more personal details Luke seems to be less concerned with the drama of one man's personal decision than with underlining the

*discipleship requires both attitudes and behaviours that release us from the claims of wealth and status and orientate us to others and their needs.*

challenge of discipleship to wealth. In v28-30 Peter's words, 'we have left everything and followed you' consciously mirror the twin challenge to the ruler of v22: sell all and follow me.

What matters is not simply the future salvation sought by this ruler but living faithfully in the present around money. We do not have to sell all before we can follow Jesus. The nuances around financial discipleship in Luke and indeed in the whole of scripture are far richer than giving everything away. But discipleship requires both attitudes *and* behaviours that release us from the claims of wealth and status and orientate us to others and their needs. To inherit life in the future we must live this way in the present. Generous, baggage free living is a natural discipleship response to being called by Jesus.

### Stewardship application

Thomas Aquinas writes about how a soldier will grease his sword and scabbard at all times so that it does not rust. This way he can draw his sword quickly when the enemy is before him. Aquinas uses this illustration to describe 'liberality' which sounds like generosity but is more akin to what today we would call financial capability, the right and proper planning and spending of money. But the purpose of this virtue of liberality is that when occasion demands we are *free to give generously* to those in need, a higher virtue. For the rich ruler money had rusted his soul such that when the challenge of discipleship and generosity is before him he is unable to draw his sword.

### Leaders

We think that money opens doors for us, very often it does. But, as in this story, it can also close doors. As one writer says, 'This young man is not the hoarder in barns, the prodigal playboy, or one who disregards the poor in Luke's other stories (Luke 12:13-21; 15:11-32; 16:19-31). He has kept the law from childhood, yet he walks away from Jesus with a broken heart, knowing full well what he is leaving behind. Alongside his spiritual formation his relationship with money has shaped his attitudes and ultimately compromised his ability to follow Jesus.

Many of us Christians today struggle to connect faith and money. We learn to read the bible, say our prayers, worship and serve. But around money our decisions are largely driven by a consumer society and shaped by our 'money stories'. Our money stories are those accumulated memories and experiences that make up our emotional DNA around money and shape our actions and attitudes.<sup>1</sup> The challenge is to reflect on how many of our life choices are driven by financial considerations rather than informed by the gospel challenge to faithful living and giving around money. We should reflect on our money stories, be aware of the power of money in our lives, whether we have much or little.

*If we want to release  
the grip of wealth  
our lives we need to  
release our grip on our  
money.*

*These uncomfortable,  
challenging, awkward  
passages about the  
rich are talking  
about us!*

## Planned givers

What we do with our money is a normal and formative part of discipleship. The rich ruler is challenged to give his money away in order to find freedom to follow, freedom to engage with others. Such freedom is one of the joys of generous giving. If we want to release the grip of wealth our lives we need to release our grip on our money. We do that by giving generously. It may start as a command, as a discipline but it quickly becomes a joy, a way of life.

Generosity sets us free and that freedom includes openness to the needs of others and the blessing that they can bring to us. This quote from Henry Drucker is used elsewhere in Giving in Grace but bears repetition: *In this act [of giving] we disenthral ourselves by overcoming our slavery to possessions. We demonstrate that there are values in the world more important to us than our own selfish aggrandisement. True giving is an act of self-liberation. It becomes one of the major achievements of our life.*

## Plate givers

It is entirely understandable that we read this story about a rich man and assume that when we talk about the rich the bible means someone other than me! But we should not forget that for Luke just having two cloaks was worthy of a challenge from John the Baptist! (Lk 3:10-11). For most of Luke's readers and for millions upon millions today life is a hand to mouth existence. Hundreds of millions live on less than £1 a day. These uncomfortable, challenging, awkward passages about the rich are talking about us! Rather than fearfulness that the gospel requires us to become poor there is a challenge in this story to make radical generosity a key aspect of our discipleship, not a sideshow to the main event of personal salvation. We can make a huge difference to the lives of other people by our own generous giving and that such generosity also transforms our own lives as we share generously with others. The challenge to the ruler is also consistent with Jesus' commands to give wealth away (12:32-34 and 14:33) and the practice of the disciples in 5:1, 28 18:28.

---

<sup>i</sup> On money stories see the short paper, 'Written on our hearts: telling our money stories'. Type 'written' into the search box at [www.stewardship.org.uk/money](http://www.stewardship.org.uk/money)



### Luke 12:13-21 (NRSV)

#### Parable of the Rich Fool

*Someone in the crowd said to him, 'Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.' But he said to him, 'Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?' And he said to them, 'Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.' Then he told them a parable: 'The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, "What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?"*

*Then he said, "I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God.'*

### Suggested readings

Eccl 2:17-26 ■ Col 3:1-11

**This parable of the rich fool is one of those many money themed passages found only in Luke's Gospel. The greater the mass, the greater is the gravitational pull of wealth on our hearts and our lives (Randy Alcorn).**

A request from the crowd for Jesus to settle a disputed inheritance shifts the focus of Jesus teaching in chapter 12 from faithfulness under persecution to faithfulness around money. His teaching moves from his disciples (12:1) to the crowds (12:13) and then back to the disciples in 12:22). Yet the words used by Jesus blur this transition. 'Life' is used in 12:15 with reference to the crowds and then reappears several times in 12:19-23 with reference to teaching to the disciples. Similarly, 'possessions' in 12:15 used to the crowds becomes 'goods' in 12:18 and then back to possessions in 12:33 but here used with disciples. There is no warning against greed for the crowd that is not applicable to those who follow as Jesus' disciples.

### Judge and divider

The request for arbitration by Jesus is not unusual. Moses sets out the rules concerning inheritance (Deut 21:15-17, Numbers 27:1-11 and 36:7-9) and their interpretation was a matter for religious leaders. The firstborn son had a double portion of inheritance but all sons were entitled to something. At issue here seems to be a withheld or a disputed inheritance – familiar to us in, say, disputed wills - and the stakes are high. Land is wealth and social status. This request may be a plea for simple justice but given the place of wealth in Luke and, as discussed below, the use of 'greed' in verse 15 more likely this is about wanting more land. In either case, Jesus is not denying the importance of good financial arrangements but addressing deeper issues.

### The gravitational pull of wealth

The questioner addresses Jesus as *Teacher*, a title used elsewhere in the Gospel (cf Luke 7:40). But while the title acknowledges Jesus' authority the request seeks to secure Jesus' support for his position regarding the inheritance. Perhaps we should note here the subtle, gravitational pull of wealth by which we invoke faith in support of our beliefs or practices around money and possessions. The issue which Jesus seeks to address is not that of rights but a much deeper question. Where does our centre of gravity around money really lie: with the Lordship of Christ or in our needs, desires or ambitions?

In Jesus' reply the use of 'man' is not discourteous (cf John 2:4) but



*'all kinds of greed'  
recognises the many,  
varied and deceptive  
ways in which our  
relationship with  
wealth can distort  
our attitudes.*

serves to resist Jesus becoming 'triangulated' into a personal dispute. Indeed in Jesus' use of "judge" (*kritē*) and "divider" (*meriste*) there may be an echo of Exodus 2:14 where Moses is challenged as to his authority after killing the Egyptian. Jesus does not countenance any role in solving disputes - and neither should stewardship leaders.

### All kinds of greed

Verse 15 marks the transition to the parable with Jesus warning against, 'all kinds of greed' (*pasēs pleonexias*). Now *pleonexia* is a strong word, used in the Greek OT to translate a Hebrew word denoting unlawful material gain. The word group appears 19 times in the New Testament, 15 of which are in Paul and in all but one case means striving for material possessions. In both Eph 5:3 and Col 3:5 the word is linked with idolatry. The presenting issue here, therefore, seems not to be the proper sharing of an inheritance but greed and the seduction of money causing tension between brothers. Indeed, the plural phrase, 'all kinds of greed' recognises the many, varied and deceptive ways in which our relationship with wealth can distort our attitudes. A reasonable hope and expectation of inheritance can become an entitlement, a gift becomes a demand. Such is the nature of money. It is indispensable, weaving itself into the fabric of life and so, 'as a means to so many different ends money becomes an end in itself'. (John Hull)

The heart of verse 15 is the contrast between life and possessions. The phrase, 'the abundance of possessions' (*perisseuein tini*) is difficult to interpret. It may mean to have in abundance or possibly to have more than enough. The paradox here, and why money is such a difficult discipleship issue, is that we cannot have life without 'possessions', expressed here by a participle of the Greek word *huparchō* with the meaning, 'what one has'. Our material bodies are how God made us and how we express ourselves within our world. The issue is not one of having or not having possessions but attitude and orientation.

### Watch and guard

Accordingly Jesus instructs the crowd to both watch out for (*orate*) and guard against (*phulassesthe*). Both verbs are instructive. There is firstly a need to watch, to be aware, to be mindful of how easily we can become hostage to the aspirations of a consumer society. Secondly, the warning to 'be on our guard' suggests both alertness and action to be taken. What might those practical actions be?

### What shall I do?

It is often said that there is no criticism of wealth creation in this parable or any suggestion that it is ill gained. Indeed a strand of the wisdom tradition sees wealth as the blessing of God and a reward for diligence and labour (Prov 10:4, 28:19). The criticism in the parable is only of the self centred attitude of the farmer. However, this is to miss the seductive nature of accumulated wealth. The notion of

*'What shall I do? '  
That is, in a  
nutshell, the heart  
of stewardship and  
precisely the question  
we should ask!*

*an understanding of  
generosity arising  
from this passage is  
wider than giving  
alms to the poor.*

'rich' in Luke has negative connotations (1:52-53, 6:24) and here the farmer seems to be an exemplar of greed. His bigger barns store both surplus grain and "my other goods" (v18).

The heart of the story is the question in verse 17: *'What shall I do?'* That is, in a nutshell, the heart of stewardship and precisely the question we should ask! In the face of such abundance and in a world where millions are poor, how should I live? What principles should guide my decision making? The problem in our parable is that the rich farmer answers that question with no reference to anything or anyone outside of himself.

Luke captures this powerfully in the way the farmer poses the question, "What shall I do...I shall do this" (*ti poiēsō...touto poiēsō*) The use of soliloquy, talking to yourself, is a literary way of gaining insight into the heart, the inner thoughts of a person (Lk 16:3, 20:13). Six times in v17-19 the personal pronoun 'I' is used along with 'my barns', 'my grain' and 'my goods'. Even his plans for the future are self centred. The trinity of eat, drink and be merry comes from the OT (Eccl 2:24, 3:13, 5:18) where it has the sense of comfort for the worker and is the gift of God. But here (as in The Wisdom of Sirach 11:19) there is no sense of gift, only of self reward. This farmer has secured his own future without any reference to God who in OT thinking is the ultimate owner and giver of the land.

### Concern for others

Missing in this story is not only any reference to God but also any concern for the wider community. Although the wisdom tradition values diligence, hard work and wealth it also recognised the ultimate giftedness of all prosperity (Eccl 5:19) and with that the requirement to protect the poor (Dt 15:1-18; 24:10-15) But for our farmer the wider community are invisible, nothing is shared, no gift is recognised. Note that an understanding of generosity arising from this passage is wider than giving alms to the poor. It is about justice and righteousness in our business dealings.

It is for this that the farmer is a fool. The word references neither intelligence nor faith. It is used in the OT for those who deny God in their practice (Ps 14:1, 53:1; Prov 14:1). He addresses his soul as though he were its ultimate owner, speaking of its comfort and its future. Outwardly religious; inwardly self referential and blind to the needs of others and the right honouring of God with our material possessions. . The word "soul" is taken up by God while "this very night" stresses immediacy and urgency. There is an ironic contrast between the abundance stored in his barns and the little time that he has left. The verb "required" (*apateō*) is in the third person plural as a way of speaking about God or the angel of death and stresses that this life is loaned not owned. There is a greater claim on this man's life.

*The issue is not having but holding too tightly and our reluctance to be generous. Such foolishness diminishes our life and that of others.*

*When we give away in a regular, planned way what the world sees as ours we are making a powerful statement that what we have belongs not to us but to God and he has a first claim on it through our giving.*

## Stewardship application

In the mid-1800s, some prospectors in the California gold rush who thought they had made their fortune learnt that their discovery was not gold but iron pyrites: fool's gold. Our farmer's money made a fool out of him and can do the same to us. One aspect of our modern consumer culture, as Richard Ryan notes, the issue is not just about having more than enough, it is about having more than others. The issue is not having but holding too tightly and our reluctance to be generous. Such foolishness diminishes our life and that of others.

## Leaders

Personal discipleship in the area of money is not exhausted by careful management of money, nor by tithing. God is the ultimate owner of all that we have and wealth becomes our centre of gravity when we come to believe that what we have is ours. We cease to receive with gratitude and give with joy from what is gifted to us. This assertion of ownership lies at the heart of what Paul calls the love of money. As philanthropic thinker Paul Shervisch notes, Christian thinking about money is not a renunciation of wealth but the renunciation of self. We are caretakers, stewards but never owners. How might we feel if asked to list our most valued possessions and then sign them over to God? The hard message is that ultimately our mortality shatters the illusion of ownership.

## Planned givers

We live in a consumer society. Highly professional advertising shapes us to expect an affluent lifestyle while even innocent programming around finding a new home can create a sense of disillusionment with what we have. The one way communication of TV is especially powerful, creating the illusion that people are more affluent than is actually the case. We need to find practical ways by which we can practice Jesus warnings to be mindful and to guard ourselves: critical awareness as we watch and read, the disciplines of contentment and gratitude, care with credit and a workable household budget are some ways forward.

## Plate

The invisible people in this story are the poor who depend on the rich farmers grain and his practice of justice in business. Very often our hearts are moved to enormous generosity by scenes and stories of tragedy that play out in our newspapers and our TVs. Such generosity is part of what it means to follow Jesus and it is nurtured by the practical discipline of giving in a planned manner, through envelopes or standing orders. But there is something else. When we give away in a regular, planned way what the world sees as ours we are making a powerful statement that what we have belongs not to us but to God and he has a first claim on it through our giving.

### Luke 19:1-10 (NRSV)

The story of Zacchaeus

*He entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax-collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way.*

*When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, 'Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.' So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, 'He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.'*

*Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, 'Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.' Then Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.'*

### Suggested readings

Isa 1:10-18 ■ Acts 4:32-36

The story of Zacchaeus is familiar, so much so that we can miss the significance that Luke attaches to the story. The story comes at the end of the so called 'travel narrative' which forms the central core of Luke's Gospel. Right at the start of the travel narrative three would be followers of Jesus are challenged 'as they moved along the road' (Luke 9:57). The motif of travel or of journey for Luke represents discipleship, hence his description in Acts of early Christians as followers of the Way (Acts 9:2, 19:9).

As the other bookend to the travel narrative Zacchaeus' encounter with Jesus is a model of what real discipleship is all about and the story captures three important themes in Luke's gospel. The first theme is Luke's concern to connect discipleship with issues of wealth and possessions and explored in the introduction to these notes. The second theme is that of salvation. Luke alone in the synoptic gospels calls Jesus 'Saviour' (Luke 2:11, Acts 5:31, 13:23) and the heart of the Zacchaeus story is Jesus' declaration that salvation has come to the house of Zacchaeus. We note that for Luke salvation is a present reality not a future event although Luke 21:28 does allow a future element. The final theme is that of repentance and conversion. The noun 'repentance' (*metanoia*) is used once in Mark and twice in Matthew but five times in Luke's Gospel six times in Acts. The verb is used twice in Mark, five times in Matthew but nine times in Luke's Gospel and five times in Acts. Conversion (the verb is *epistrephein*) is used once in Matthew and Mark but a total of 13 times in Luke-Acts. Repentance, conversion and discipleship around money are the proper response in Luke to hearing about Jesus, a response modelled by Zacchaeus.

Positioned at the end of the travel narrative the story of Zacchaeus picks up earlier themes in Luke's gospel. As with Bartimaeus (Luke 18:35ff.) a man seeking Jesus is hindered by a crowd. The rich ruler (*archōn* in Greek; (Luke 18:18ff) would not give his money away and follow Jesus. Here Zacchaeus is a chief tax collector (*architelōnēs*, unknown in secular Greek) who shows great generosity. The despised nature of tax collecting and the potential for fraud is reflected in the challenge to honest practice in Luke 3:10-14, material found only in Luke, and underlies the contrast in the parable of the humble tax collector and arrogant Pharisee in Luke 18:9ff. The reader knows that Jesus is a friend of tax collectors but Zacchaeus is also a wealthy man and in Luke's Gospel the rich don't do heaven well. Zacchaeus is a man of contradictions.

*The nature of discipleship is that it is something we do for ourselves but not by ourselves.*

### Found by Jesus

The one who seeks Jesus is himself sought and found by Jesus. Bartimaeus wanted to see Jesus, as does Zacchaeus. Yet looking up in to the tree Jesus sees and invites Zacchaeus to share a meal with him. The nature of discipleship is that it is something we do for ourselves but not by ourselves. The story conveys a sense of both purpose and urgency. The English translations "it is necessary" or "I must" come to your house today do not quite capture the force of the Greek *dei* which expresses divine purpose, Luke also neatly captures in grammatical form the urgency in the instruction to Zacchaeus, "hurry and come down..... so he hurried down" (*speusas katabēthi....speusas katebē*). We should note also the use twice of the important word 'today' (*sēmeron*), used twice. In verse 5 it expresses the immediacy of the invitation Jesus extends to Zacchaeus. In verse 9 'today' is used theologically to declare the presence of salvation in Zacchaeus' home. This is the word that is used in Luke 4:21 at the Nazareth sermon which inaugurated Jesus' ministry in which he declared good news to the outcast and marginalised.

### What did Zacchaeus actually promise?

Although this is one of the best known and loved Gospel stories there is a key question of interpretation at the heart of this story. This is verse 8 where, traditionally, Zacchaeus promises to give half his wealth to the poor and repay those he has defrauded. Some scholars believe that verse 8 is actually an addition by Luke himself and does not belong to the original story. Certainly without verse 8 the story still has a clear flow and meaning. If Luke did insert it then it serves to underline the importance that Luke attaches to the issue of wealth and possessions.

However, assuming that verse 8 is integral to the story there is still a question of how to understand it. The difficulty is that the verbs in verse 8 are both in the present tense "give to the poor ....give back four times as much" (*didōmi...apodidōmi*). The traditional reading of the story treats these verbs as futuristic presents, translating them as, "I will give... give (or pay) back." On this traditional reading having received Jesus into his home Zacchaeus is a now changed man. His commitment to putting his financial affairs in order and being generous to the poor is evidence of his change of heart.

However, an alternative way of reading verse 8 takes the *present* tense of the verbs at face value, Here Zacchaeus is not saying *what he will do in the future* but declaring to Jesus and the critical crowd *his current practice*. If Zacchaeus finds that he has inadvertently defrauded anyone he repays four times as much and his current practice is to give half of his possessions to the poor. On this reading Zacchaeus' repentance is not part of the gospel story and Jesus declaration that salvation has come to his house is a vindication of a godly son of Abraham marginalised by religious leaders and popular judgement.



*Luke makes a clear link between how we relate to money and possessions and our discipleship.*

*Generosity is not a precondition of grace but a result of grace finding us. At the heart of all our thinking about giving is not the language of obligation but that of invitation.*

On balance the traditional reading seems preferable. The force of 'today', the declaration of salvation and Luke's characteristic concern with money as part of discipleship suggest the response of Zacchaeus is more appropriate to a generosity that demonstrates repentance than a vindication of current practice. Note also the way the term Lord is used in Luke. From its first occurrence in Luke 7:13 Lord (*Kurios*) increasingly takes on the meaning of Jesus authority. Here Zacchaeus addresses Jesus as Lord in sharp contrast to the rich young ruler for whom Jesus is a "good teacher".

The point is that this Lordship of Jesus extends to and is directly related to the realm of our money and possessions. Whichever reading of verse 8 we choose Luke makes a clear link between how we relate to money and possessions and our discipleship. The challenge is simple and blunt. In the realm of our money and possessions, who is Lord, self or Christ?

### Repaying fraud

The OT law is very explicit about what to do in the event of fraud. Lev 6:2-5 stipulates repayment of the original amount plus 20%. Exodus 22:1-4 provides for fourfold or five fold restitution for a stolen and slaughtered animal and double for an animal still alive. Zacchaeus offer of fourfold restitution matches or exceeds the most generous provision of the law. His is not a calculated generosity but the response of one who is gripped by grace and for whom financial integrity is hard evidence of a changed heart.

### Stewardship application

In the film *Sleepless in Seattle* the central character describes meeting his recently deceased wife in this way, 'it was like coming home to a place I had never been before' In his own distinctive way Luke captures in this story of Zacchaeus the sense of homecoming, welcome, purpose, belonging, acceptance and love.

### Leaders

Generosity is not a precondition of grace but a result of grace finding us. At the heart of all our thinking about giving is not the language of obligation but that of invitation. Maturity in giving will never grow as a response to financial need but when it is rooted in a spirituality of grace and response. That is why in Philippians 4:15 Paul talks about a partnership of both giving and receiving. This story challenges us to ask about what motivates our generosity. Is it the financial needs of our church, the benefits we receive from its ministry, our joy in its sacred space or is it the experience of receiving grace, of meeting Jesus? Have we made that connection which Zacchaeus instinctively made between being gripped by grace and responding with grace filled generosity?



*...to be a faithful steward of money is about our lifestyle, our integrity and right dealings with what is entrusted to us.*

### Planned givers

Generosity for Zacchaeus was expressed not only by giving half his possessions to the poor but in repaying those he had defrauded. Discipleship around money is not exhausted by personal giving, however generous. Giving everything away is not the only model of giving and financial faithfulness in the Bible. Indeed it can be an abdication of responsibility. For Zacchaeus, and for us, to be a faithful steward of money is about our lifestyle, our integrity, our right dealings with what is entrusted to us. As it is often said, stewardship is as much to do with the 90% that we retain as it is the 10% that the Bible invites us to give.

### Plate givers

It is no accident that Zacchaeus meets with Jesus over a meal. Such meals were characteristic of Jesus' ministry, as noted in the introduction. Meals were important in Jesus' day and for us food is an important part of the welcome we extend to others and of the shared life of our families, including our church family. We might even say that a meal is a kind of parable of the Kingdom of God in action.

We can give generously of our wealth, we can do right with our wealth and we can also share our wealth with others in two ways. The first is by extending hospitality to others, a rich and warm welcome and food is one of the ways we do that. A warm and welcoming church with facilities for all age ranges and needs is key to that welcome but it also costs us money. Secondly we can share, as Zacchaeus did, by giving to the needs of others and that is what our church seeks to do in our mission giving outside off the walls of our church. The story of Zacchaeus is not about generous giving into a vacuum but about open hands and open hearts to the community, to the poor (Dt 15:1-11)

### Luke 21:1-4 (NRSV)

The Widow's mite

*He looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. He said, 'Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on.'*

### Suggested readings

Neh 10:31-39 ■ 2 Cor 8:8-13

**Few passages in the bible speak quite so directly about giving as this story of a widow's gift of all that she had. What implications does this have for our stewardship teaching?**

This story has been taken to prove that giving is a matter of the heart and that God is not interested in the actual amount that we give. It is a short step from here to justify both a small gift when more is possible and to justify secrecy in giving which finds confirmation in Jesus' teaching about giving in secret.

Yet this story begins with Jesus positioning himself where he can see what people give, as indeed can others. The action takes place in the temple treasury where, it seems, there were a number of rooms for keeping valuables. There were also 13 trumpet shaped receptacles for offerings of different types in a room off the court of women. It is possible that offerings were declared verbally to the priest and this is how Jesus knew what was given. There is nothing in the story to suggest that his knowledge of the gifts was in any way supernatural.

It is worth noting at the outset that the privacy of much of our giving practice is in sharp contrast to the joyful, processional and public nature of offerings in many parts of the world wide church, including many here at home in the UK.

The immediate context and the story itself Luke finds in Mark's Gospel; Matthew omits it completely. Immediately preceding the story is the trenchant criticism of the religious leaders and their love of show and status. The passage concludes with the suggestive text, 'they devour widow's houses and for a show make lengthy prayers' (Lk 20:47a). Indeed the money related stories of temple cleansing and the widow's gift may almost be understood as bookends to passages in which Jesus is critical of the religious leaders.

In retelling the story characteristically Luke focuses on the giving of the rich. In Mark Jesus watches the crowds giving their *chalkon* or copper coins and notes many rich givers putting in large amounts. In Luke, by contrast, Jesus looks up and sees *only* rich givers. However, interestingly Luke drops Mark's stylistic reference both to 'many' (*polloi*) rich and their large sums (*polla*) and instead speaks of their *offerings* (*ta dōra*). Luke also changes Mark's description of the widow as poor (*ptōchē*) with the word 'needy' (*penichra*) but leaves the former word on the lips of Jesus. These changes are surely more than stylistic and are intended to underline the worship context in which the action takes place and to contrast show and status of the

*Discipleship around money is not exhausted by personal generosity. .*

*The act of generous giving is always a prophetic challenge to inequalities of income and opportunity.*

wealthy and religious with the quiet piety and poverty of the widow. Earlier commentators suggested that the two *lepta* which the widow gave was the minimum that could be given but apparently a single *lepton* was acceptable as a gift. If this is true, the widow could have given less than she actually did. In addition the change from poor to needy in v2 may just be intended to suggest that the widow did have some resources on which to live. The point of the story is not, therefore, that the widow gave absolutely *all* that she had and that there is virtue only in divesting ourselves of all that we have. Rather there is a contrast between the sacrificial gift of a poor widow with the showy giving of the rich which is part of a seeking after status.

The word 'widow' in 21:2 is anticipated by the preceding passage which criticizes the teachers of the law for devouring the houses of widows. It is not clear what is meant by 'devouring houses'. It may be that the scribes charged a fee for legal advice or that they abused hospitality offered to them. Alternatively, it may be that the scribes were mismanaging the properties of widows having been appointed by their former husbands to care for an estate on their death. In any event, the contrast in Luke's story is powerful: the scribes as legal experts on the one hand, the widow as a vulnerable person in society on the other. In the OT the widow was expressly protected by the Law (Exodus 22:23; Dt 10:18, 24:17, 21; 2 Kings 4:1-7) yet here they are the victims of those charged with interpreting the law to God's people.

Given the immediate context in both Mark and Luke we should be slow to interpret the story of the widow's gift as model act of sacrificial, personal generosity and piety. Some commentators take the view that Jesus is implicitly not contrasting showy wealth and pious generosity but actually criticizing the very system by which care for the temple takes all that the widow has. Such a reading is strengthened by the observation that nowhere does Jesus explicitly approve of the widow's gift.

This is probably to read too much into the story. Wealth and status in Luke are often in the firing line and the temple in Luke is treated positively. Nor should we evacuate the story of personal meaning or negate the piety and generosity of the widow's gift. The gospel calls us to radical giving and in this gift the widow is the exemplar of discipleship. Yet as a widow she is to *receive* care and protection yet here those charged with this care and with the wealth to make showy gifts are those accused of devouring widow's homes. Discipleship around money is not exhausted by personal generosity. There has to be a challenge to our attitudes, to giving in proportion to our income, to our love of external things and our commitment to justice and ethical dealings with money.

Stewardship is more than the generous, personal response of the individual to what God has done in and for them. The act of generous giving is always a prophetic challenge to inequalities of income and opportunity. The personal generosity of the widow who gives all she has is a standing judgment on those who give much but retain for

*Our giving is  
a measure of our heart  
and what we give to  
others reveals  
our hearts.*

*Generous giving  
is a prophetic act.  
It challenges our  
preoccupation with  
wealth and calls us  
again and again to  
remember the poor  
and to act with justice  
in all our dealings.*

themselves more than enough to exhibit show and status.

There is a real sense in which our giving is truly measured by what have after we have given. In that sense the widow has indeed given a great deal more than the wealthy. It remains true that as a percentage of income those on poorer incomes give more than those on larger incomes

### Stewardship application

Sir Moses Montefiore was once asked how much he was worth. Pausing for a moment Sir Moses spoke an amount of money. Surely he was more wealthy than that commented his questioner to which Sir Moses replied, *'You didn't ask me how much I own. You asked me how much I am worth. So I calculated how much I have given to charity this year. You see, we are worth what we are willing to share with others.'*

The truth is that we cannot detach talk of the giving heart from the gift that reveals the heart. Our giving is a measure of our heart and what we give to others reveals our hearts. No gift, however, is ever a proxy for justice and righteous dealing with money and with other people.

### Leaders

There is a challenge in this story to connect our personal commitment to generosity to shared commitment to justice and righteousness around money. In a world of poverty our giving is more than a personal expression of love and gratitude. Giving is countercultural; generous giving is a prophetic act. It challenges our preoccupation with wealth and calls us again and again to remember the poor and to act with justice in all our dealings.

### Planned givers

The widow's gift was small in cash terms amount but it was entirely consistent with the condition of both her income and her heart. And here is the challenge for us today. Can we say the same about our own giving – that what we give reflects both what God has given to us and our relationship with God?

### Plate givers

There is always a danger of driving a mental wedge between our talk of being generous and the gift that we actually give? Do we too easily talk of a generous attitude while actually giving a gift that is inconsistent with generous living?

*Such O my soul, are the miseries that attend on riches. They are gained with toil and kept with fear. They are enjoyed with danger and lost with grief. It is hard to be saved if we have them and impossible if we love them; and scarcely can we love them but we shall love them inordinately. Teach us O Lord, this difficult lesson: to manage conscientiously the goods we possess, and not covetously desire more than you give to us. (Augustine sermon 133)*

*Sermon notes*

Background notes on  
four passages in Mark's Gospel



week <b>one</b>	3
<b><i>Feeding the Five Thousand</i></b>	
Mark 6:30-44	
.....	
week <b>two</b>	9
<b><i>The Widow's Mite</i></b>	
Mark 12:38-44	
.....	
week <b>three</b>	14
<b><i>Way of Cross</i></b>	
Mark 8:27-38	
.....	
week <b>four</b>	20
<b><i>Great Commandment</i></b>	
Mark 12:28-34	
.....	



### Mark 6:30-44

(NRSV)

#### Feeding the Five Thousand

30 The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. 31 He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. 32 And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. 33 Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. 34 As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. 35 When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; 36 send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat." 37 But he answered them, "You give them something to eat." They said to him, "Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?" 38 And he said to them, "How many loaves have you? Go and see." When they had found out, they said, "Five, and two fish." 39 Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass. 40 So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties. 41 Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. 42 And all ate and were filled; 43 and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. 44 Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men.

### Suggested readings

1 Chronicles 29:10-20 ■ Romans 8:31-39

**This is the only miracle found in all four Gospels, a story full of contrasts: ministry and rest, abundance and scarcity, faith and failure, material need and spiritual hunger. At the heart of the story is a rich picture of what it means to be a steward: the bread the disciples share with the crowd they first receive from Jesus as both blessed and broken.**

The miracle of the Feeding of the Five Thousand tells the story of how God abundantly supplies both physical and spiritual needs in a desert place. This is not the first time that God has done this. The disciples, the crowd and any Jewish readers of Mark's gospel would recall the story of God providing manna in the wilderness to feed Israel. At points in the miracle story there are echoes of that earlier miracle.

This feeding of the five thousand also recalls another story, one with which Mark's readers are familiar. When Jesus takes, blesses, breaks and shares the bread (Mk 6:41) the telling of the story is influenced by the Eucharistic practice of the church. At the heart of worship is a shared meal in which relationships matter, material needs are met and material things carry profound spiritual reality. And, as Paul reminds us, this sacred meal requires the sharing of rich and poor if it is not to bring judgement upon our life together (1 Cor 11:17-22). There is no sharp divide between the spiritual and material worlds; indeed the simple meal in Acts 27:35 has the elements of taking bread, thanking, breaking and eating. The material elements so necessary for human life are carriers of human flourishing and of profound spiritual reality. The stewardship implications are not to be missed. What we do under God with our money meets human need through the ministry and mission of our church. No less the offering of money, which of course takes place in our shared worship, has a sacramental character. Our giving speaks not just of needs met but the response of grace, faith and trust to God who gives us all things in Christ.

#### They reported all they had done

The story of the feeding of the five thousand is a significant story for Mark. He refers back to the miracle 6:52 and again in 8:17-21 while he also offers his readers the parallel story of the feeding of four thousand. In his gospel of discipleship Mark captures the insights and the blind spots of those who would follow Jesus. The feeding miracle

*This story invites us to withdraw our consent to unrestrained consumerism and to celebrate the material abundance of God's world.*

*This godly rhythm of teaching and resting, of engagement and withdrawal, of activity and reflection is critical to a healthy life and ministry.*

is immediately preceded in Mark by the Herod's execution of John the Baptist (Mk 6:14-29) but it is organically linked to the earlier mission of the Twelve in 6:6b-13. Mark may wish to contrast the feasting and dancing at court and the failure to see God's call of the Baptist over against the desert withdrawal of the Twelve and the feeding of the crowd, thus painting the first in a series of vivid contrasts.

Stewardship preaching might explore this contrast further. In a consumer society more is good, contentment is economic bad news and in Zygmunt Bauman's powerful phrase, the poor are redefined as flawed consumers. Our stewardship response is neither ascetic retreat nor unthinking collusion. This story invites us to withdraw our consent to unrestrained consumerism and to celebrate the material abundance of God's world in a way that releases the poor and hungry.

### **Get some rest**

In 6:30-34 Mark provides a scene setting introduction to the miracle. Significantly this is the only time in Mark where the disciples are called 'apostles' or when anyone other than Jesus teaches. The reason seems clear: they are apostles because they are *sent* by Jesus and they teach what they have learned from their Master. But here is another vivid contrast, these apostles and teachers will fail to understand the meaning of the miracle of the loaves (Mk 6:52).

The disciples report on the success of their mission but the crowd presses upon them. Mark captures this in his repeated use of 'many' (*polloi* and variants). There are 'many coming and going' (v31), many recognized Jesus (v33) and there was a large crowd (*polyn ochlon*) when he arrived and Jesus began to teach many things. They need rest and space and Mark uses a pregnant phrase in 6:31: come, by yourselves, to a solitary (*erēmos*, perhaps 'desolate') place. Mark's use of this word is intentional; he repeats it in 6:32 and again in 6:35. As noted above this is one of the ways in which the miracle of the loaves echoes the Exodus story of God's provision of manna in the wilderness

Thus Mark builds another vivid contrast in his story. On the one hand there is the press of the crowd and, we might add, the careful planning that prepares the crowd for the distribution of the loaves and fish (6:39-40). On the other hand there is the invitation to rest and the quietness of a desert place. Both have value, both are necessary. This godly rhythm of teaching and resting, of engagement and withdrawal, of activity and reflection is critical to a healthy life and ministry.

Could it be that with no time to eat themselves the disciples lost their ability to trust in Jesus to meet the needs of the crowd? Could exhaustion lie behind their desire to dismiss the crowd and its needs or their failure to grasp the meaning of the miracle? We don't know, but neither the bible text nor the reality of ministry burnout preclude such a reading. Ministry has its own rhythm and the same is true of

*Without prayer,  
reflection and  
leadership a  
stewardship ministry  
risks lacking a vision  
of God's abundance,  
being overwhelmed by  
the need or fearful  
of scarcity.*

stewardship ministry in the local church. Stewardship both for the individual and the local church cannot mature if we only react to financial need or crisis or to the pressures of personal and church life. Without prayer, reflection and leadership a stewardship ministry risks lacking a vision of God's abundance, being overwhelmed by the need or fearful of scarcity.

### **Sheep without a shepherd**

Jesus describes the crowd as sheep without a shepherd; he has compassion on them and begins to teach. It is interesting to note that the Greek verb here (*esplanchnisthē*) is linked elsewhere in the gospels to the healing miracles of Jesus (Mt 20:34; Mk 1:41) and the compassion that forgives financial debt (Mt 18:27).

The phrase 'sheep without a shepherd' (omitted by Luke and Matthew) carries more echoes of the Exodus story. It comes from Numbers 27:17 where Moses asks God to appoint a shepherd in his place and the imagery is strong in Ezekiel 34:5, 'Woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock?' Mark's story may also carry an echo of Moses' cry in Numbers 11:13, 'how can I find meat for all these people?' Some scholars note that Jewish tradition saw bread as a symbol of the Torah, the five books of Moses, and the five loaves may be understood to reflect that tradition.

As Moses led his people in wilderness and fed them with manna so Jesus teaches and provides abundantly for those who follow him in the scarcity of the wilderness. And just as for Israel, the scarcity of the desert is for the disciples a place of both trust and testing. It is late. They propose dismissing the crowd so they can find food, a suggestion as compassionate as it is pragmatic. Instead Jesus commands them to provide for the crowd themselves. Here we come to the heart of the story and the most vivid contrast is painted. On the one hand there is the need of the crowd, the scarcity of resources and the solution of the disciples which is to send the crowd to *buy* food (v36), the verb being repeated again in v37b. On the other hand there is the abundant provision of bread and fish and the command of Jesus to his disciples to *give* the crowd something to eat (v37a). Again the verb 'to give' is used twice in v37, the second time on the lips of the incredulous disciples astonished at the impossibility of the suggestion made by Jesus.

Compared to Matthew and Luke at this point there is a rawness in Mark's account which captures something of the frustration, the incredulity, perhaps even the irritation of the disciples at being asked to do the impossible: it would cost six months wages to feed this lot! Joel Marcus observes that this part of the story 'ends on a note of spiritual deficiency that corresponds to, but is even more distressing than, the material deficiency that has occasioned it.' (p418). And the story presents us and our churches with a stewardship challenge. The needs and ministry opportunities facing the local church can seem to overwhelm scarce resources. Time and again congregations express

*the miracle story challenges us to change our stewardship story from one of scarcity to abundance, from crisis to confident trust.*

*God the creator is the owner and giver of all things and in his goodness entrusts it to us for our enjoyment, contentment, gratitude and giving.*

doubts that they can meet the financial challenge facing their church. The core challenge in this passage - you give them something to eat - can provoke incredulity, frustration, irritation and opposition. Faced with the need of the crowd the disciples instinctively and quite understandably calculate the monetary cost; they think in terms of financial transactions. We do the same today. Our response to financial difficulties can often be constrained by thinking only in terms of balancing a budget, of monetary transactions. And again like the disciples there can be some mystification as to how the spiritual life could possibly address this need.

The miracle of the loaves invites us to see things differently. It is an invitation to shift from a pragmatic, measured, transactional response to the ministry needs of our churches and to think more in terms of abundant, generous provision and trust in God's. To be sure, this is not an invitation to fiscal irresponsibility; churches must balance their budgets. But the miracle story challenges us to change our stewardship story from one of scarcity to abundance, from crisis to confident trust. How we talk about money in church must change from the language of financial transaction necessary for survival and problem solving to the language of expectation and transformative generosity which releases God's abundant provision.

### **Take, bless, break, give**

Jesus response is illuminating. Rather than reacting angrily to disbelief he asks two things of his disciples. First he asks what food they do have; the five loaves and two fish. Second, he asks them to arrange the people in groups so they are ready to eat. Joel Marcus finds in Mark's use of words an increasing orderliness. What begins as a crowd in 6:34 (*ochlos*) becomes eating groups (*symposia*) and then clusters (*prasia*) of 100 and 50 which, he suggests, may reflect Israel's military camp arrangements in Exodus 18:21, 25 and be further echoes of Exodus typology in the story.

Jesus takes, blesses and breaks the bread in 6:41, wording which is surely influenced by the words of the Lord's Supper. The bread is multiplied and Jesus *gives* (that verb again) to the disciples that which they then in turn set before (*paratithōsin*) the people. That which meets the need of the crowd is first blessed and broken by Jesus and the disciples share from their own hands what they have first received from Jesus.

This is a quite beautiful picture of the heart of Christian stewardship. All that we have, the wealth and possessions which God entrusts to us as stewards comes into our hands both blessed and broken. Stewardship is rooted in both creation and Christology. God the creator is the owner and giver of all things and in his goodness entrusts it to us for our enjoyment, contentment, gratitude and giving (1 Tim 6:7-10, 17-19). Meanwhile Paul bases his appeal to generosity on the example of Christ who became poor that we might become rich (2 Cor 8:9). Mature stewardship is characterized by generosity because that we which we give we have first received,

*Something very visible happens in that people are fed but how the miracle happens remains invisible, unseen. And that is how it is with our giving.*

*We must also ensure that how we think and talk about money in church embraces not only the necessary disciplines of monetary transaction but also the vision of transformative generosity.*

from God. That which we receive as both blessed and broken we are commanded to share.

All ate and were filled and here again there may be an echo of the Exodus tradition, a reference to Deuteronomy 8:10, 'you shall eat and be full'. The Greek verb has the nuance of being completely satisfied and in Mt 5:6 is used in the Beatitudes of the promise of no longer hungering and thirsting for righteousness. The baskets in which surplus is collected are called *kophinos*. They were small wicker baskets and at a later date it seems formed traditional attire of the Jews. The twelve baskets may reference the leaders of the twelve tribes of Israel.

There is no indication in the story that the people knew a miracle had taken place and perhaps here is a final contrast in this story. Something very visible happens in that people are fed but how the miracle happens remains invisible, unseen. And that is how it is with our giving. What our giving achieves is visible in the sacred space, ministry and mission of our churches. What remains invisible and unseen is the grace that transforms the heart of the giver, the inner blessing and breaking of all that is entrusted to us, the willingness to trust in God's provision.

### **Stewardship application**

This is a story of contrasts: ministry and retreat, scarcity and abundance, hunger and plenty, the hidden and the visible. What story does our church tell? Is it a story of scarcity, a fearful story which constrains our vision of what is possible under God and makes our budgets, if we have them, an exercise in managing that scarcity? Or is it a story of abundance, of God's gifts given to us, blessed and broken and of our hands giving of what we have received? Are our churches characterized by the rich practice of hospitality which speaks of grace and gift received and shared?

In this story the people are arranged in groups, ready to receive a miracle that has not happened. Are we organized for abundance so that our financial planning and our money talk are open to blessing, our budgets not fearful, our giving not guarded, nominal or begrudged?

None of this is to deny the very real financial challenges churches face. Sadly closure is sometimes inevitable and the challenge is to end its life faithfully and well having lived its life faithfully and well. Each church must maximize all the income streams at our disposal: rentals, grants, legacy income, Friends groups and fundraising and more. But we must also ensure that how we think and talk about money in church embraces not only the necessary disciplines of monetary transaction but also the vision of transformative generosity. Or, as theologian Walter Brueggemann puts it, we must abandon the myth of scarcity and instead celebrate a liturgy of abundance.



*Jesus' response to his disciples was not to judge but to ask, 'what do you have?' And this is the starting point for our own stewardship journey.*

Recognising the rich diversity of our congregations stewardship preaching may wish to use some of the differentiated reflections and challenges below.

### Leader

As they offer their gifts each week millions of Christians acknowledge that 'all things come from you, and of your own do we give you'. What we put in the offertory has first been given to us, blessed and broken. Are we grateful for the blessing that has been given to us? Are we generous with what has been given into our hands? Does our giving reflect the sacrificial giving of Jesus who was broken for us that we might be fed?

### Planned

There is a rhythm to stewardship as to so much in the Christian life. There is much in church life that is busy, there is much in day to day life that demands our time and attention. Good stewardship is not born in the busyness but in the willingness to step back, to think, to pray. So are we making time to pray about, to review, refresh and renew our giving?

### Plate

'What is this among so many?' Faced with our own needs and the needs of those we love, with the needs of our church and perhaps those of charities we care for it is all too easy to feel powerless, frustrated, even angry. Jesus' response to his disciples was not to judge but to ask, 'what do you have?' And this is the starting point for our own stewardship journey. So what is the one single step that you can take today to give something and to give regularly so that God can meet needs in us and through us?



### Mark 12:38-44

(NRSV)

### Suggested readings

Haggai 1:1-11 ■ Romans 11:33-12:8

#### **Jesus Denounces the Scribes**

*38 As he taught, he said, 'Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, 39 and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! 40 They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.'*

#### **The Widow's Offering**

*41 He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. 42 A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. 43 Then he called his disciples and said to them, 'Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. 44 For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.'*

**This well-known story offers two perspectives on our stewardship. The first perspective is personal, the spiritual discipline of generosity. The second perspective is prophetic, which is to say that good stewardship speaks against both injustice and poverty. <sup>i</sup>**

The brief story of the Widow's Mite cannot be understood in isolation from the context in which Mark places it. Immediately prior to the story is Jesus' fierce denunciation of the scribes, the teachers of the Law, for their desire for public honour and their greed. However the widow's story also follows closely on the heels of Jesus' encounter with another scribe (Mk 12:28-34) who is treated sympathetically and said to be not far from the Kingdom.

#### **Beware the teachers of the law**

We are not dealing, therefore, with a blanket condemnation of religious leaders but rather with the surrender of some, perhaps many, to the gravitational pull of wealth and social esteem. Their 'flowing robes' (*stolais*) were used on festal occasions and the word is used in the Greek text of the OT to describe both priestly and kingly garments (Ex 28:2, 29:21, 31:10). By virtue of status the scribes could expect respectful acknowledgment by the populace as they moved through the economic life of the market whilst they also had a seats of distinction in the place of worship and enjoyed the social life of the wealthy. The Greek word for the special seat in the synagogue is *prōtokathedrias* and in Mark's account it is neatly balanced by the reclining couch used at feasts which is the *prōtoklisis*.

The story reflects the honour conscious culture of Greek and Roman society which was familiar to Mark's readers but a far cry from the suffering Messiah and the discipleship to which he calls his followers.

The reference to banquets flows into the second criticism of the scribes, that of 'devouring the houses of widows'. It is not clear what this means. It may be that scribes overcharged for their legal advice, that they seized property for the non-payment of tithes or that they abused the hospitality offered to them. A further suggestion is that the scribes were appointed to manage the estates of widows on the death of their husbands and were reaping financial rewards from doing so.

*Mark sets the story of a widow's piety in the wider context of the biblical injunction to care for the needy and the prophetic challenge to those who practice injustice.*

In any event, the contrast here is that of the widow, who along with the orphan in the Old Testament is entitled to protection over against the rapaciousness of the very religious leaders who had a duty of care (Jer 7:6; Ez 22:7; Mal 3:5; Zech 7:10). Now in the Old Testament the Levite is closely associated with the widow and orphan because the Levites owned no land, the source of sustenance and wealth. So the image of religious leaders seeking honour and wealth at the expense of widows is deeply shocking. Isaiah 10:1-4 may also be in the frame here with its reference to evil writs, documents that could come from a scribe. Mark sets the story of a widow's piety in the wider context of the biblical injunction to care for the needy and the prophetic challenge to those who practice injustice.

### Jesus sat down

The fact that Jesus is described as sitting may have been a source of some controversy. It seems that some Rabbis believed that only the Davidic king could sit in the temple while others felt that not even the King could do so.

The Treasury normally refers to the temple storerooms which lay behind the walls of the inner court and were not accessible to lay people. For this reason the setting of this story is understood to be a room off the court of women in which there were 13 trumpet shaped receptacles for offerings of different types. There is no suggestion that Jesus' knowledge of the gifts being given was supernatural. It is possible that offerings were declared verbally to the priest and this is how Jesus knew what was given. Perhaps mention of the two small coins is intended to be symbolic of her offering in contrast to the public display of lavish generosity by the wealthy.

We should not miss the significance of Jesus observing the gifts as they were given. We sometimes speak of giving as a very private business, our business and no one else's. There is of course much truth in this observation although perhaps personal is a better word than private. But although our gifts are deeply personal that cannot be a refuge from accountability before God for the gifts that we make. Jesus positions himself to see what is given and the manner in which it is given.

### Poor and rich

Mark paints a vivid linguistic picture. The 'crowd' throws in money, *chalkon*, which refers to copper coins. It is interesting to note in passing that in Luke's gospel Jesus sees only *rich* people and what they give is not 'money' but the more religious word, 'offerings'. Thus Luke strengthens the religious context of the story.

Mark knows the rich are there of course, because he notes that in the crowd 'many rich were casting in much'.<sup>ii</sup> By contrast to the crowd and the wealthy, Mark notes the presence of 'one widow', bluntly described as poor. Luke will change this to 'needy', although he retains the word poor on the lips of Jesus. Poor or needy, this

*Good stewardship is not restricted to generous giving but must embrace the challenge of social justice, indebtedness, financial exclusion and financial capability.*

*Good giving here is not about how much we give but from how much we give.*

is not just about words. The material needs of the widow do not disappear from view because she gives generously. Her piety does not render her poverty meaningless or dismiss her entitlement to care, compassion and justice. She does not stop being poor or needy because she is generous. Rather her personal generosity speaks of the generosity of God while her status as poor widow remains a prophetic challenge to, 'act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God' (Micah 6:8). Good stewardship is not restricted to generous giving but must embrace the challenge of social justice, indebtedness, financial exclusion and financial capability.

This widow's gift is two *lepta* and the tense of the verbs Mark uses in his story matters. With reference to the crowd Mark says that they 'were throwing' - the imperfect, continuous past tense. But the widow 'gave' - a single point past tense (the aorist tense). Thus Mark contrasts the widow's one off gift with the showy repetitious giving of the rich. The word *lepta* is a Greek word which, it seems, denotes money of little value and this is the word translated by the traditional word 'mite'. To explain this Greek term to his readers Mark equates the two *lepta* with a *quadrans*, the least valuable Roman coin and which English bibles translate as worth a penny or a few pence.

### **Sacrificial giving**

Jesus calls his disciples to him, a Markan turn of phrase that denotes the start of some teaching. This widow has given 'as much as all' (*panta hosa*). This may mean she gave as much as the rest put together and the contrast of verbs just noted would support such a reading. But it may also mean that her gift was more generous than any of the individual gifts offered. Either way, the widow's gift is seen to be more generous than the richer, more frequent material offerings of the rest.

What is the stewardship principle here? These wealthy givers gave much but gave from their surplus, retaining enough to live and indeed to live well. By contrast the widow's gift has a sacrificial quality, coming not from her surplus but from that which she needs to live. The statement that she gave all she had is probably not to be taken literally. Rather it is an exaggeration to make the key point that she was giving from her means not her surplus. Good giving here is not about how much we give but *from* how much we give.

In short, there is affirmation here of the biblical principal of proportional giving. This is reflected in the Law of the Tithe (Deut 14:22-29) in which 10% of what we have is commanded as a gift. It is also affirmed by Paul in 2 Corinthians 16:1-2 where we are called to give in proportion to what we have received and in the encouragement to give from what we have, not from what we do not have (Dt 16:17, 2 Cor 8:12).

But the widow's gift invites us also to embrace sacrificial generosity. Our giving should be something that we notice, something that costs

*Good giving is deeply personal and proportionate to what we have received. Each meaningful gift is a sacrament of gratitude and worship. But good giving is also prophetic in a world in which enough means just a little more.*

*Each meaningful gift reminds us that God is the ultimate owner and giver of all we have and this remembrance called Israel and calls us to practice social justice, to resist corruption and systemic greed.*

us. There are not two conflicting principles here; it is simply that the percentage we give is not a fixed percentage regardless of income but a percentage that costs us something, that is sacrificial.<sup>iii</sup>

### More than a generous gift

It has already been suggested that the story of the widow's generous gift is set against a wider biblical command to social justice. Some commentators go much further. For some the widow's gift is not an example of good giving but a mistake, evidence of the rapaciousness of the religious leaders and the oppressive burden of the Temple as religious institution. Far from praising her piety Jesus laments over a mistaken gift to a failing religious system.

Although this is too strong it is an important corrective to easy, personalized readings of the story. Personal giving, however generous, does not wholly discharge our duty of stewardship towards God. We cannot evacuate the story of any challenge to personal, sacrificial giving but nor can we reduce the act of giving to a personal, privatized act of spirituality. Good giving is a prophetic business which challenges those who would accrue wealth at whatever cost to other individuals and to society. The practice of generosity is subversive of a culture of greed and grasping. The generous giving of this widow is a prophetic challenge to the wealthy (and that is each of us) not only to give generously but also to practice justice and to live with integrity both in our personal lives and as we serve the institutional life of church as a spiritual Temple.

### First fruits

We see something of these two perspectives, the personal and the prophetic, in the requirement to bring the first fruits found in Deuteronomy chapter 26. The Israelite brings the first fruits of the land with which he has been blessed in personal gratitude to the place of worship. There, before the priest, he offers the gift in the place of shared worship. He then recites an ancient creed, a statement of belief that retells the story of Israel's rescue from Egypt. The gift of first fruits is transformed from a personal act of gratitude to a confession of shared faith in which the land is not a private possession but the gift of God to all his people. It is the giftedness of this land which underpins the laws which will protect the poor from usury or interest, release them from debt and economic slavery and restores the land every fifty years.

Good giving is deeply personal and proportionate to what we have received. Each meaningful gift is a sacrament of gratitude and worship. But good giving is also prophetic in a world in which enough means just a little more. Each meaningful gift reminds us that God is the ultimate owner and giver of all we have and this remembrance called Israel and calls us to practice social justice, to resist corruption and systemic greed.

*Our giving is a  
measure of our heart  
and what we give to  
others reveals  
our hearts.*

## Stewardship application

Sir Moses Montefiore was once asked how much he was worth. Pausing for a moment Sir Moses spoke an amount of money. Surely he was more wealthy than that commented his questioner to which Sir Moses replied, *'You didn't ask me how much I own. You asked me how much I am worth. So I calculated how much I have given to charity this year. You see, we are worth what we are willing to share with others.'*

We cannot treasure this story as a self-serving justification of low level giving on the grounds that Jesus is more interested in the heart of the giver than how much we actually give. There is, of course, a significant measure of biblical truth in this statement. However, as someone has said, we can give the widow's gift only if we give with the widow's heart and we are on the widow's income. We cannot default on our stewardship responsibility to give in proportion to our income and justify it by an appeal to the heart. Our giving is a measure of our heart and what we give to others reveals our hearts. No gift, however, is ever a proxy for justice and righteous dealing with money and with other people.

Recognising the rich diversity of our congregations stewardship preaching may wish to use some of the differentiated reflections and challenges below.

## Leaders

Our personal commitment to generous giving cannot be divorced from our commitment to justice and righteousness around money. Our personal financial decisions, even our giving, do not take place in a vacuum. Giving is countercultural, a prophetic act. It challenges our personal preoccupation with wealth and calls us again and again to remember the poor and to act with justice in all our dealings.

## Planned givers

The widow's gift was small in cash terms amount but it was entirely consistent with the condition of both her income and her heart. Can we say the same about our own giving? Does it reflect what we have been given and does it cost us something in the giving?

## Plate givers

Is there a danger of driving a mental wedge between our talk of being generous and the gift that we actually give? Do we too easily talk of a generous attitude while actually giving a gift that is inconsistent with generous living?

<sup>i</sup> There is some overlap in these notes with notes on Luke's version of this story found at the *Preach Luke!* tab in the Preaching section under Designing the Programme.

<sup>ii</sup> The force of Mark's writing is clear in the alliterative Greek text: *kai polloi plousioi eballon polla.*

<sup>iii</sup> This addresses the criticism that tithing is regressive, asking more of the poor than of the rich. For some tithing is a starting point in their giving not journey's end.



### Mark 8:27-38

(NRSV)

#### **Peter's Declaration about Jesus**

*27 Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that I am?' 28 And they answered him, 'John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.' 29 He asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered him, 'You are the Messiah.' 30 And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.*

#### **Jesus Foretells His Death and Resurrection**

*31 Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. 32 He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 33 But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'*

*34 He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 35 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. 36 For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? 37 Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? 38 Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.'*

### Suggested readings

Proverbs 21:1-8 ■ 1 Peter 4:7-11

**This story is pivotal in Mark's Gospel as Jesus directly challenges his disciples to grasp the cost of discipleship, a cost he is soon to bear himself. The way of the cross invites us to relinquish our tight hold on the life we think we want if we are truly to live. This challenge is no less real in our discipleship practice of generous giving.**

To paraphrase the football commentators, Mark is a gospel of two halves. The first half breathlessly follows the words and acts of Jesus' ministry; the second half is devoted to just the final weeks of Jesus' life. This passage, Peter's Confession and the teaching of Jesus on the way of the cross that follows, forms the watershed, the tipping point of the Gospel. All that has happened up to this point, the miracles, parables, teaching and the casting out of demons, are vectors that come to a focal point in this direct question, 'who do you say that I am?'

#### **Who do you say that I am?**

At the outset we note the interesting suggestion of Joel Marcus that Mark intentionally links our passage to the preceding miracle, the two stage healing of the man born blind. Marcus suggests that Peter's double movement of profound spiritual insight and instinctive resistance to a suffering messiah is paralleled in the half seeing, half blind man, noting both Jewish and Christian traditions that portray Satan and the demons as those who blind human beings.

Mark frames his account of Peter's confession and the prediction of the cross (8:27-33) with bookend verses referencing the opinions of 'men'. The passage opens with a question, 'who do people [literally, 'men'] say I am?' and closes with the rebuke to Peter for thinking as the world and not with the mind of God. In between Peter has a moment of spiritual insight into who Jesus is but fails to grasp that the suffering of God's messiah is part of God's purpose and plan.

Our own discipleship bears the hallmarks of both insight and resistance. Often looking back and sometimes in the moment we recognise milestone moments of spiritual maturity and growth. But such moments are experiences alongside our blind spots, known and often unknown, and our no-go areas for discipleship. Life is lived out in the tension between our desire for the things of God, our ambivalent desire for our human flourishing and our capacity for sinful self-serving. Such ambiguity is the canvas on which



*...we today are reminded that the way of the cross can be costly and sacrificial.*

*'Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ.'*

*Dietrich Bonhoeffer*

the discipleship challenge to faithful stewardship and grace filled generosity is painted.

### **The son of man must suffer**

In 8:31 the words 'he began to teach' are important because Mark uses this verb (*ērxato*) to introduce a new movement or theme in his Gospel. This new theme is the suffering of the Messiah (see also 6: 2-3, 11:17-18). A feature of Mark's gospel is the so called messianic secret noted in the introduction to these notes. Now, at this pivotal point in Mark's gospel Jesus spells out precisely what it means to be the Messiah. He speaks openly to his disciples (the crowd is not in the frame until verse 34) of his impending rejection, suffering and death.

The suffering of the Messiah is no accident of human history. In v31 the English words 'must suffer' do not carry the force of the Greek word Mark uses (*dei*) to convey the sense divine purpose lying behind the suffering of Jesus. This same word is used in 9:11, 13:7 and 13:10, and corresponds to the use of 'it is written' in 9:12 and 14:21. It is not simply that Jesus suffers, he does so in obedience to the will and purpose of God.

This is the first of three great suffering prophecies which dominate this section of the Gospel and illuminate Mark's theme of discipleship characterised by both insight and failure to understand and follow.<sup>i</sup>

At 9:31 the second suffering proclamation is followed by the disciples arguing about greatness and at 10:33 the third suffering proclamation is followed by the disciples seeking places of honour at Jesus' side. Stories in this section include Jesus' challenge to easy, one sided divorce and, significantly for our specific purpose, the inability of a wealthy young man to meet the cost of discipleship by surrendering his wealth.

After each suffering prophecy the disciples fall short of the challenge to imitate their Master. In each generation readers of Mark's gospel recognise their own failings as they follow Jesus on the road. Mark's readers in Rome and we today are reminded that the way of the cross can be costly and sacrificial.

In his famous book *The Cost of Discipleship* the martyred German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer coined the powerful phrase, 'cheap grace'. He defined cheap grace as, 'the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ.' Cheap grace can be an institutional failing as well as a personal resistance to embrace a cost in discipleship.

### **He began to rebuke him**

Talk of a suffering messiah is too much for Peter who takes Jesus aside and rebukes him. Jesus in turn rebukes Peter but before he does so, in v33, Jesus first turns and looks at his disciples. This

*The challenge to costly discipleship applies to what we do with our money.*

*...our best intentions and pastoral concerns are entwined inseparably with our resistance to the cost of discipleship.*

may suggest that Jesus knew that the other disciples shared Peter's objection or possibly that the force of Peter's challenge to Jesus could unsettle the disciples' uncertain grasp of this challenging new teaching. Either way, Jesus directly confronts a contagious narrative of cheap grace, of discipleship without cost. The verb 'rebuke' (*epitiman*) used here by both Peter and Jesus is used elsewhere in Mark of the demons in 1:25, 9:25, the storm that threatened the disciples in 4:39, of those who tried to silence Bartimaeus and those whom the disciples mistakenly rebuked for bringing children to Jesus.

The challenge to costly discipleship applies to what we do with our money. How could it be otherwise? How could the discipleship challenge to obedience and cost be pertinent in every area of life save our money when money considerations are rarely far from the moral choices and discipleship decisions we take each day? And the invitation to generosity and other aspects of financial stewardship can elicit extremes of response and opinion. More than one church council member has expressed incredulity that the congregation is being asked to give more. More than one has told and retold the story that no one has any more to give which infects the rest of the leadership. More than one church council has mistrusted the intentions of the denominational body when financial matters are discussed.

Partly this is because, like Peter, our best intentions and pastoral concerns are entwined inseparably with our resistance to the cost of discipleship. Partly it is because of the ambiguous nature of money. As Bonhoeffer observed, 'earthly possessions dazzle our eyes and delude us into thinking that they can provide security and freedom from anxiety. Yet all the time they are the very source of anxiety'. Both individuals and congregations must wrestle with what it means to be a good steward of ambiguous money and, as Paul puts it, aspire to 'excel in the grace of giving'.

The plain fact is that we must resource the ministry needs of our church primarily, though not at all exclusively, through generous giving. Some individuals, some churches, rise to this challenge and embrace the cost. They blend the careful cultivation of the various strands of church income with a commitment to nurturing regular, planned, committed giving by the congregation. Some resist such discipleship responsibility, take refuge in their sense of entitlement or retell a story in which the blame for their predicament lies outside of themselves. Jesus resisted Peter's narrative of discipleship without cost. The situation will change from church to church and the needs in one place are very different from those in another. But with sensitivity to where God has called us a mature stewardship ministry will resist a story which deflects the challenge to generous giving by pleading scarcity or attributes blame for our predicament outside of ourselves.

*...in stewardship no Christian can stand detached from the need to resource the life and ministry of their church or from the invitation to give and live generously.*

## Get back in your place

'Get behind me, Satan!' This is pretty strong to our ears but the force of the rebuke should not be overstated. Although our English bibles use different words the words 'behind me' (*opisō mou*) are used again in very next verse as a positive description of discipleship: 'if anyone desires to follow *after* (= *behind*) me ...'. So the rebuke is not a ruffling of Peter but is perhaps better read as an invitation to Peter to take his place behind Jesus as a disciple and not stand in Jesus' way on the road to Jerusalem.

## Not just for the few

Thus far Jesus has been talking to his disciples but in verse 34 the crowd is intentionally brought into play. The phrase 'he called the crowd to him' uses the same verb (*proskalesamenos*) as Mark used for the initial calling of the Twelve in 3:13, their sending out in 6:7 and again in 8:1. Perhaps Mark is suggesting here a fresh invitation to follow Jesus, renewed in the light of this new teaching about the way of the cross, to both the Twelve and the crowds. In any event, it is the crowd and not just the disciples who are called to costly discipleship.

This challenge to the crowd is relevant to stewardship and church life today. A small number in each congregation give a disproportionate amount of the income in a church and often of the voluntary time offered to the church. But while it is a well-known feature of church life (and indeed charitable giving as a whole) it should not be like this. There is not one class of disciples called to live sacrificially and another exempt from this vocation. And in stewardship no Christian can stand detached from the need to resource the life and ministry of their church or from the invitation to give and live generously.

## The way of the cross

Verses 34-38 pack a punch in the form of a series of short sayings which are carefully structured by Mark. The programmatic verse is v34 with its vivid picture, all too familiar for Mark's original readers, of carrying the cross as a model for discipleship. Now Mark alone of the gospels includes a reference to, 'for my sake and *the gospel*'. The other occurrence of this is in Mark 10:29-30; in view there is the loss of family and, significantly for our reading of this passage, fields which constituted the most abiding wealth in Jesus day.

Verses 35-38 unpack the meaning of this primary verse, each beginning with and linking back to v34 by the word 'for' - it is clearer in the Greek than in our English translations. The two verbs 'renounce' and 'take up' are both *past* (aorist) tense verbs while the verb 'let him follow' is a *present* tense imperative. Discipleship involves both the decision to start a journey and that ongoing commitment to keep moving. The challenge of v35 is stark: to try to cling on to life is to lose it. True life is only found in the obedience which is willing to accept cost and sacrifice.

Discipleship around money becomes explicit in verses 36-37 in

*...by failing to care well for others, we actually do not properly take care of ourselves.*

*At the centre of financial discipleship is our willingness to relinquish our pride of ownership and to receive what we have as a gift from God.*

which the language of gaining and losing comes from the world of commerce. The verse is informed by Psalm 49:7-12 with its reference to those who trust in the abundance of their riches only to die and leave wealth to others. But the Greek word for life here, *psyche*, can also mean 'soul' and speaks of more than just physical loss. The industrialist and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie touched on this when he wrote, 'he who dies rich, dies disgraced'.

At the end of their book *The Paradox of Generosity*<sup>ii</sup> Christian Smith and Hilary Davidson write this: 'generosity is paradoxical. Those who give their resource away, receive back in turn. In offering our time, money, and energy in service of other's well being, we enhance our own well being as well .... By clinging to what we have, we lose out on higher goods we might gain. By holding on to what we possess, we diminish its long term value to us.... In short, by failing to care well for others, we actually do not properly take care of ourselves'.

Verse 38 uses the language of shame, language that would resonate more powerfully with Mark's first readers than it might for us today. Yet there is a twist. In the OT it is God who brings people to shame but here Jesus will 'be ashamed' of those who deny him. The verse is a powerful appeal to stay faithful in a hostile world. In its own way our consumer culture is just such an environment in which the seduction of wealth and the treadmill of work and acquisition can easily displace contentment, generosity and gratitude as the reference points for living well with wealth.

### Stewardship application

600 years ago Copernicus looked at the stars with his naked eye (the telescope would not be invented for another 100 years) and rediscovered the lost truth that the earth orbited the sun yearly and spun on its axis daily. His findings, published in *De Revolutionibus* in 1530, would be challenged, as would those of Galileo a hundred years later.<sup>iii</sup>

We find the same resistance to thinking differently and the same desire to keep ourselves at the centre of our own universe in our attitudes to wealth. Our hearts and the society insist that it is all about me. 'I know about wanting more' says businessman Edward Lewis in the film *Pretty Woman*, 'I invented the concept'.

The words of Jesus in this passage challenge us to put our lives in orbit around that which truly gives life and this is no less true of our financial lives. At the centre of financial discipleship is our willingness to relinquish our pride of ownership and to receive what we have as a gift from God. It is, says Jesus, in this letting go that we find true life.

The joyful discipline of generous giving is a symbol, we might even say it has a sacramental nature, of that letting go of our pride of ownership. But generous giving is also the primary spiritual discipline by which we do that work of relinquishing our pride of ownership and receiving what we have as a gift. Or, to use other words, we are

*we are invited with Peter to think not with the mind and passion of the world but with that of God himself.*

*It is hard to hear the discipleship call to obedience, to a generosity in which we find not loss but gain, not sorrow but joy, not scarcity but abundance.*

---

<sup>i</sup> Intriguingly within this section of the Gospel Jesus and his disciples are 'on the road' to Jerusalem although the destination is not actually firmly stated until 10:32ff. On the road but not there yet is not too shabby a metaphor for discipleship

<sup>ii</sup> OUP 2015, page 224

<sup>iii</sup> On this see *Christian Stewardship for the 21st Century: Lessons from Copernicus* by Dan R. Dick

invited with Peter to think not with the mind and passion of the world but with that of God himself.

This word about costly discipleship around money is hard to hear. Like a badly tuned radio our consumer culture creates a great deal of background noise! TV, internet, billboard and lifestyle magazines all tell us what the good life looks like. It is hard to hear the discipleship call to obedience, to a generosity in which we find not loss but gain, not sorrow but joy, not scarcity but abundance.

Recognising the rich diversity of our congregations stewardship preaching may wish to use some of the differentiated reflections and challenges below.

### Leaders

Do we need a Copernican type revolution in how we think about giving? What does our giving say about who is truly at the centre of our lives? When it comes to giving - how we give and how much we give - do we think with the mind of God or of the world?

### Planned

Jesus teaches in this passage that if we hold tight to what we have we lose it; if we let go of what we have we gain the life of the kingdom. So what makes us hesitate to let go and give more generously? What are our points of resistance? What makes it hard for us to refresh our giving? What is the hard word of Jesus that might rebuke us and thus invite us to a renewed discipleship?

### Plate

Think of a badly tuned radio; how difficult it is to hear the words or music clearly. Our consumer society shouts loudly about the good life even if we struggle for the basics. It makes it hard for us to hear the invitation to give regularly to support the ministry and mission of our church. So what act of commitment can we make? How can we connect the life of our church to that of our purses, wallets and bank accounts?



### Mark 12:28-34

(NRSV)

### Suggested readings

Deuteronomy 15:7-11 ■ James 1:19-27

#### **The First Commandment**

*28 One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, 'Which commandment is the first of all?' 29 Jesus answered, 'The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; 30 you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' 31 The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these.' 32 Then the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other'; 33 and 'to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,' and 'to love one's neighbour as oneself,'—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.' 34 When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, 'You are not far from the kingdom of God.' After that no one dared to ask him any question.*

**In this passage we are challenged to love God with all that we are. God created us with physical bodies and material needs so living well and loving God with our wealth and possessions is inevitably part of both human flourishing and Christian discipleship.**

This passage in Mark is the culmination of three skillful questions put to Jesus by the religious authorities in order to trap him. The first question challenged the authority of Jesus to act as he did and his effective riposte is the parable of the tenants in the vineyard. The second is a kind of 'third rail' political question about paying taxes to Caesar and the third a religious debate about marriage and life after death. A fourth question is considered here: which commandment is the most important?

Some questions are genuine questions seeking an answer. Some are asked, as above, with the intent to trap Jesus into taking sides. And some questions, however real, are inadequate to the mystery that the question explores. This question asked by a scribe, in Mark's gospel at least, is both a real question and one that addresses a mystery that is beyond human comprehension. In Mark's gospel this particular teacher of the law is presented sympathetically by comparison with other passages (1:22, 2:6-7; 3:22, 7:1-13). By contrast, Luke's account is less sympathetic. The initial question from the Scribe is asked in order to test Jesus and the supplementary is to justify himself, thus leading into the parable of the Good Samaritan.

#### **The first commandment**

Mark's writing style is characterized by a certain raw and urgent style. In this passage Mark conveys something of the scene in the piling up of participles: 'having come forward', 'having heard them reasoning with Jesus', 'having seen how well he answered'. The teacher asks about the first (*prōtē*) commandment and the word 'first' carries the connotation of 'most important'. It was indeed a question the scribes debated: is one aspect of the Law more important than others, even equal to the combined weight of the rest? By way of illustration, Rabbi Hillel was challenged by a gentile to teach him the whole law while standing on one foot. He replied, 'that which you hate for yourself, do not do to your neighbour. This is the whole law; the rest is commentary'.

In reply Jesus quotes from the Shema, the Jewish declaration of faith



*...we are commanded to love because God is love and gives himself to us in love in creation and in Christ.*

*...to give generously is rooted ultimately in the grace and giving of God himself. To be sure, such giving will resource the ministry of our church and sustain our buildings as sacred spaces in our communities.*

found in Dt 6:4-5, so called after the first word of passage, *sema*, hear! Some commentators note that according to the Mishnah, the written compilation of rabbinic teaching, the Shema was said daily in the Temple alongside the Ten Commandments, the Temple being the setting for this encounter in Mark's gospel. The Shema is, of course, essentially a reflection of the first of the Ten Commandments, to love the God of Israel.

Interestingly, although Matthew and Luke use Mark's account as their source both omit the first part of the Shema, quoting only Dt 6:5 and the command to love God with all that we are. But Mark retains the first part of the Shema which is not a command but a declaration: the Lord God is One. This is not accidental; the scribe will use these same words in his response to Jesus, again found only in Mark, in verse 32.

This is neither a technical note nor a detached observation! Any command from God about how we should live will always arise out of the nature of God himself. There is a why before the what. Here we are commanded to love because God is love and gives himself to us in love in creation and in Christ. Indeed, as if they are bookends, Leviticus 19:18 which is quoted as the second commandment ends with a further declaration, 'I am the Lord'.

Accordingly, the gospel injunction to give generously is rooted ultimately in the grace and giving of God himself. To be sure, such giving will resource the ministry of our church and sustain our buildings as sacred spaces in our communities. But the heart of generosity is the generosity of God towards us. This is what Paul has in mind when in 2 Corinthians 8:1-9 he roots both the generous giving of the Macedonian church and the challenge to generosity in Corinth in the grace of Jesus himself.

### **With all that we are**

Now it gets a little complex at this point! The Hebrew text of the Shema has only three elements: heart (*kardias*), soul (*psyche*) and power (*dunameōs*). The words of Jesus in Mark retain heart and soul, replace power with the word 'strength' (*ischuos*) and further adds the word, 'mind' (*dianoias*). And if that is not enough, to complicate matters a tad further in his response the scribe replies with just three phrases in which both heart and strength are retained but in which mind (*dianoias*) is replaced by understanding, (*suneseōs*).

The reasons for these different words need not concern us. One possible explanation, it seems, is the different translations of the Hebrew original in the Greek version of the OT. The key thing to note is that this passage shines, as it were, four floodlights on what it means to act, think and feel as a human being. There is a different emphasis in each word. For example, in Jewish thought the heart is not the seat of emotion as we might say but the seat of human will and decision making. But it is a mistake to try to press each word too hard and explore a particular aspect of human life. The phrase

*...there is no love for God which does not embrace and issue in love for one's neighbour.*

*...God is the ultimate source and object of our love which is expressed tangibly in our love for those with whom we live.*

'the whole of...' *(ex holēs)* is used four times over – the whole of your heart, the whole of your strength and so on. It conveys a sense of fullness and of that which arises, our thoughts and actions and convictions, from the inner life of a person.

### The second is this

The Scribe had asked only about the first, most important commandment but Jesus adds, uninvited, a second: love your neighbour as yourself.<sup>i</sup> This is a direct quote from Leviticus 19:18, a verse quoted also in Galatians 5:14 and Romans 13:8-10 as a summary of the law.

In what sense is this the 'second' commandment? Does it mean the second most important in rank order? Or does it mean, as we might say today, that this is the other side of the coin, a command inseparable from the first. Or to nuance this further, does it mean that this second command is organically derivative from the first. It cannot stand on its own but the first command organically generates the second. Joel Marcus suggests that as the Ten Commandments were traditionally received on two tablets the phrasing here reflects that division. The love of God is a summary of the first four commands; love of one's neighbour a summary of the remaining six.

In any event, one thing is clear: there is no love for God which does not embrace and issue in love for one's neighbour. The love of God, received and extended by us cannot be contained in a privatised spirituality that knows nothing of compassion, community, respect and justice. As E Schweizer comments, 'it is impossible to keep the first commandment unless one lives according to the second.... Love for God is the first thing that will be revealed by love for one's neighbour'.

### Well said teacher

The scribal response in v33 is interesting in that it is the only Gospel account of a teacher of the law agreeing with Jesus. As if he had just read these notes the Scribe conflates the two commands into a single command linked by the verb 'is'. Further he affirms the unity of God in the first part of the Shema and adds a common OT phrase, 'and there is no other but him' (compare Ex 8:10; Dt 4:35; Isa 44:6).

Luke's account of this story moves to answer the self-justifying question, 'who is my neighbour?' For Mark the focus seems to be that the Scribe affirms that God is the ultimate source and object of our love which is expressed tangibly in our love for those with whom we live. And this love in action is more important than 'burnt offerings', those rules, rituals and religious practices, however much they may help to sustain our faith.

From a stewardship perspective this command to love God and neighbour is a profound challenge to look beyond our inherited traditions of 'the collection', the fundraising events and the need to balance the church books. Each of these of course has value

*Our giving must ultimately be motivated by love, modelled by our leaders and meaningful both in terms of our own income and the ministry needs of our church.*

*Good giving is a matter of obedience, thoughtfulness and decision making*

but unless they are infused by love of God and neighbour they are amongst our modern burnt offerings. Our giving must ultimately be motivated by love, modelled by our leaders and meaningful both in terms of our own income and the ministry needs of our church. Our giving is part of our worship and the offertory should be a living part of our liturgy which embraces the electronic giving of our 'first fruits' (Dt 26:1-11) by standing order or direct debit.

### **The invitation of grace**

But Mark's story ends in v34 not with the response of the Scribe but with Jesus' comment that the scribe is not far from the Kingdom. Grammatically this closes off the story. Mark's narrative begins with the scribe seeing that Jesus answered well and ends with Jesus affirming that the scribe answered intelligently (*nounechōs*). This, along with the words of the Scribe changing 'all your mind' to 'all your understanding' is surely significant.

Now to say that our giving must be motivated by love, or to read that God loves a cheerful giver does not mean we are rooting good giving in our human emotion. If we wait until we feel loving and joyful about giving our money away we could be waiting an awfully long time! This is why those elements of heart, soul, mind and strength are so important. Good giving is a matter of obedience, thoughtfulness and decision making; it is not just about our feelings. And that is why regular, planned giving is so important. We make an informed decision that is aware of the ministry needs of the church. We make an obedient decision that wrestles with the invitation of scripture to generous living. We make a heartfelt decision that responds in love to the love that God has shown to us and extends that love in tangible form to those in need.

The scribe is not far from the kingdom. Like the rich ruler in Mark chapter ten, there is more he needs to do. But if God is the source and object of love then his next step is not a command to observe Law but the invitation of grace to receive grace. It begs for each of us a very simple but profound question. At this time, perhaps especially in Lent, what next step is the grace of God inviting me to take that will help me 'excel in the grace of giving'?

### **God, neighbour and self**

In their reflective notes Francis and Atkins suggest three perspectives on this passage.<sup>ii</sup> Some of us will find here a single, overarching command to love, pure and simple. Some of us will find here two organically related commands, to love God and one's neighbour for we cannot say that we love God if we do not love our sister and our brother (1 John 2:9-11). Some of us will discover three interconnected commands: to love God, love our neighbour and love ourselves. This last is not the necessary precondition of all other loving for that would distort the thrust of Mark's story. But impaired self-love may distort our love of God and neighbour either by neglecting our own needs or making them our primary focus.

*Money and material possessions are essential to human survival and they are part of our extended self, how we live and define ourselves in the world. As such how we live with and give away our money is a defining part of loving God with all that we are.*

## Stewardship application

The author recalls a retired archbishop telling how he witnessed a priest in his diocese praying the following prayer at the offertory: 'no matter what we say or do, this is what we think of you'. These were not, the archbishop observed, the formal words of the liturgy! Nonetheless, they captured something of what the offertory is all about. Money and material possessions are essential to human survival and they are part of our extended self, how we live and define ourselves in the world. As such how we live with and give away our money is a defining part of loving God with all that we are.

Amy Carmichael famously said that we can give without loving but we cannot love without giving. Birthdays, anniversaries and celebrations have taught us that, as has our instinctive generosity at times of loss and tragedy. As Christian Smith observes, 'when generosity is embraced as a way of life, people increasingly live into the reality of what it means to be human, a fuller and truer sense of who human beings are and what we are capable of'.<sup>iii</sup> To withhold the gift of generosity from discipleship is to withhold a crucial part of who we are before God.

Recognising the rich diversity of our congregations, stewardship preaching may wish to use some of the differentiated reflections and challenges below.

## Leaders

When we give generously we honour God in worship with the first fruits of all he has given to us. Our giving must see beyond the material needs of the church building and the costs of ministry; important indeed but not, as this passage puts it, the most important things. We are to love with understanding and discernment: to know that good giving is our response to the goodness of God, that grace filled giving is our response to the grace of God, that sacrificial giving is our response to the giving of Christ (2 Cor 8:9).

## Planned

When we give generously we love our neighbour because each gift on the offertory plate or from our bank account is a life affirming gift which makes possible the ministry and mission of our church. Our regular planned giving sustains our churches as sacred places and underwrites both ministry and mission in congregation and community. And where there is a common purse or fund between churches this enables wealthier churches to ensure gospel ministry in other parts of the wider community.

## Plate

When we give generously we do something for ourselves! Of course we don't give to bless ourselves or to force God to bless us. But to give is to release ourselves from the entrapment of a consumer culture, from the subtle and seductive claims of money on our hearts. To begin to give in a regular, committed manner is the beginning of a joyful journey to which many can testify.

---

<sup>i</sup> By way of a humorous aside, the author is reminded of the observation of WH Auden that we are put on earth to help others - what on earth the others are here for I do not know!

<sup>ii</sup> Exploring Mark's Gospel by Leslie J Francis and Peter Atkins (Continuum 2002)

<sup>iii</sup> The Paradox of Generosity page 226 (OUP 2015)



## Sermon notes

Background notes on five passages in Matthew's Gospel





week <b>one</b>	3
<i>The Parable of the Two Debtors</i>	
Matthew 18:21-35	
.....	
week <b>two</b>	6
<i>Parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard</i>	
Matthew 20:1-16	
.....	
week <b>three</b>	9
<i>Parable of the Rented Vineyard</i>	
Matthew 21:33-46	
.....	
week <b>four</b>	12
<i>The Wedding feast</i>	
Matthew 22:1-14	
.....	
week <b>five</b>	15
<i>Render to Caesar</i>	
Matthew 22:15-22	
.....	

### Matt 18:21-35

(NRSV)

*Then Peter came and said to him, 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow-slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe." Then his fellow-slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you." But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt. When his fellow-slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?" And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.'*

### Suggested readings

Genesis 50:15-21 ■ Ps 103:(1-7)8-13 ■ Rom 14:1-12

In this parable the theme of financial indebtedness, an ever-present and harsh reality in Jesus' day as in ours, is used to illustrate the theme of forgiveness. The Greek verb *aphienai* literally means to cancel a debt, and comes to mean forgiveness. By taking a back bearing from the challenge to forgiving grace taught in the parable, we can draw some conclusions about handling financial matters in the light of the kingdom life to which Jesus calls us.

Matthew has brought together a parable from his own source material and a saying of Jesus in 18:21-22 in answer to a question from Peter about the limits of forgiveness. This saying has a parallel in a saying of Jesus in Luke 17:4, which Matthew has edited to now be a question on the lips of Peter. Some point to an inconsistency between the saying of Jesus and the point of the parable: while Peter is urged to forgive without limit, the lord in the parable forgives only once. Others suggest that, in the original parable, the debt to be repaid was a more realistic sum and that Matthew has exaggerated by inserting 'many talents', thus making the debt an impossible sum of money to repay. Both interpretations appear to miss the point of the parable.

The phrase 'many talents' appears to be deliberate hyperbole. This is a debt that could never be paid and the offer to repay is entirely inadequate to the debt incurred. The servant asks for time – what he encounters is grace and mercy. The debt is cancelled and he and his family are set free. The key word here is grace, which in this context means forgiveness and release from an unpayable debt. This is the heart of the gospel: with release should come both freedom and joy.

But an encounter with grace brings a corresponding obligation. The heart of the parable is verse 33; 'should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave as I had mercy on you?' This imperative of grace is expressed by the Greek word *dei* (it is necessary). This same Greek word is found in Matthew 16:21, where it stresses the divine necessity of Jesus' suffering and death. The obligation of grace is made clear at this point. It is not to attempt to repay an impossible debt but to extend that same forgiving, releasing grace to others. We are not invited to compensate in arrears for grace received by giving something back but to embrace the grace that freed us and extend it to others.

*the obligation of grace  
is not to repay an  
impossible debt but  
to extend that same  
grace to others.*

*Peter proposed a rich  
and **generous** rule  
of life; Jesus called him  
to the extravagance  
of **grace**.*

Here in this parable this grace is not extended and a second servant with minor debt is imprisoned. This is despite a plea for mercy in verse 29b, the wording of which is identical to the request for time to pay made by the first debtor. Again, the plea is for time to pay; again, the need is for forgiveness and release. This second debt is significantly less than the first. Perhaps it is meant to be a manageable debt; time indeed is all that is needed to pay off the debt but even this grace is denied by the unforgiving servant. More likely, this much smaller debt is still well beyond the capacity of the second servant to pay. As the financial crash came in 2008, the CAB reported that average client debt was a fraction under £17,000 and that, noting that the majority of CABx clients were poorer than the average householder, it would take the typical client 93 years to repay – a lifetime of debt. Indebtedness is not simply a function of the capital owed but of the debt-to-income ratio that determines capacity to repay, quite apart from what can be punitive interest and penalty charges.

The issue, then, is still not the capacity or desire to repay but the heart of the first servant. If we do not believe that we are truly debtors, then we cannot grasp the gift of grace for ourselves and we cannot extend that grace to others. Is the first servant protecting himself from further debt by calling in his assets? Or is it that deep down he does not believe he is really a debtor? The illusion of self-sufficiency, the feeling that we are in charge, is a poor conductor of grace.

The economics of grace is cyclical. In extending grace to others, there is the promise of blessing – a deeper experience of the saving and renewing grace of Christ. By contrast there is a judgement on those who will not extend that grace. This is not a vindictive punishment for not acting well, but the retention of the debt incurred. The experience of grace should result in the extension of grace. Grace not extended is grace not received.

The reality of unpayable debt and the gospel promise of gracious release from debt (a feature, of course, of the OT Law in Deuteronomy 15:1-11) illustrates the need to receive and extend forgiveness. For the Pharisees, forgiving three times was sufficient. Peter's offer of seven times was born of a glimpse of grace but even this generosity is inadequate. Jesus calls Peter to forgive seventy times – or even seventy times seven. The Greek phrase is found in Genesis 4:24, where it is used of unlimited vengeance; here it is used to express unlimited grace in forgiveness. Peter proposed a rich and generous rule of life; Jesus called him to the extravagance of grace.

### Stewardship reflections

The parable uses a shocking and unrealistic method of handling financial debt as an illustration of the liberty of grace that God brings. Those who are in the community of grace will need to handle money in a grace-filled way, certainly exercising personal responsibility but

*Peter was called  
beyond calculated  
generosity into grace.*

also refraining from sitting in judgement on others, recognising the reality of low income that underwrites so much personal debt, and extending pastoral care and support to those struggling with money anxiety.

### Leaders

We can understand Peter's need to put a price on generosity – seven times? We need to know what we ought to do. But Peter was called beyond calculated generosity into grace. To be true to grace we need to move beyond the question, 'how much I should give back to God?' To enable a realistic response, it is important that church members are aware of financial need. Ambiguity about actual cost is fatal. But as we mature in discipleship and therefore in our attitude to giving, we need to ask a deeper question: 'does my giving really reflect who I am and what I have received from God?' In practical terms, we need to begin to ask, 'What proportion of my income should I be giving to God?'

### Planned givers

Sharing is the key to receiving blessing. Failure to share means that we will ultimately lose what we ourselves have received. This is no different from Jesus' teaching in the Lord's Prayer that the forgiveness of our own sins is in some manner related to our willingness to forgive others. It is not a threat: Jesus is simply saying that this is how grace works. This is also true of the totality of our discipleship – our treasure no less than our time and our talents. The challenge is, are we truly sharing from what we have been given or are we receiving much and retaining it for ourselves?

### Plate givers

A parachute jump does not actually involve any jumping – but it does involve letting go of the plane to experience something new and exciting – and terrifying! This parable asks us to let go of being in charge, of believing that we have all the answers and to find a new freedom and joy. It is not easy to let go but it is worth it. So too, learning to give, to let go of our money, is not easy but the freedom and the joy that giving brings is worth the cost.

### Matt 20:1-16

(NIV)

*'For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the labourers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the market-place; and he said to them, "You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right." So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, "Why are you standing here idle all day?" They said to him, "Because no one has hired us." He said to them, "You also go into the vineyard." When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, "Call the labourers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first." When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat." But he replied to one of them, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" So the last will be first, and the first will be last.'*

### Suggested readings

Jonah 3:10-4:11 ■ Psalms 145:1-8

On the face of it, this parable looks very straightforward. It is a story about the treatment of different groups of workers in a vineyard – or is it? Perhaps it is about envy, about eyes set on denying others rather than set on thanking God for what was given to us. The first labourers agree, before they start work, a wage that is a perfectly acceptable, perhaps even generous, rate for a day's work. The labourers who start work three hours later at 9am are promised simply a just wage (*dikaion*). The assumption is that this will be proportionate to the day's wage of a single denarius. The parable has a sting in the tail, however, because those who work just one hour are paid exactly the same as those who have worked through the heat of the day.

The heart of the parable comes in verse 15: 'Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' The second part of the verse has more of a cutting edge than the English translation indicates. The Greek translated as 'envious' is a Jewish ethical phrase 'the evil eye' (*ho ophthalmos ponēros*), which denotes an intent born of an inner darkness. The workers react badly to a display of generosity despite the fact that they themselves are recipients of a wage that is fair, even generous. This is not about just rewards in the workplace but a deeper envy and covetousness that puts self at the centre and is not only self-seeking but also denies generosity to other people. The affluence and access to credit in a consumer culture makes us shortsighted: we privilege the present over planning for the future. It also gives us very good peripheral vision! We define our wealth and happiness not only by what we have but by what we see others have. Here it is the apparent injustice of those who worked less having the same that drives the envy of those who worked a full day.

There is, of course, no virtue in poverty. This parable cannot be used to reinforce the right of capitalism to do what it pleases with its money. The point of the parable is that there is negotiation with the workers, a fair price agreed, the creation of employment, the equal treatment of part-time and full-time workers and prompt payment on the day, as the Law of Moses required.

The Greek word for 'grumbling' that Matthew uses (*gongguzō*) occurs only this once in his Gospel. Tellingly, it is the same word used in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the OT used by the Gospel writers) in Exodus 16 to describe the grumbling of the people of Israel, which led to the gift of manna and quails in the desert.



*learn to be content  
for all we have is born  
of God's grace and  
generosity*

*somehow money is the  
raw nerve of life that,  
when touched,  
sparks the most  
profound reaction.*

The corrosive grumbling of people is met by the abundant provision of God for his people, under which none can profit or hoard and none goes short. The gift of manna is at one and the same time a blessing and a judgement on the people of Israel: a blessing to those who trust and collect what they need; a judgement on those who over-collect and cannot trust for Sabbath provision that the manna will last two days. In 2 Corinthians chapter 9, Paul will use the same story to illustrate the equality and sufficiency of God's provision as the basis for calling the Corinthians to proportionate giving to the needy church in Jerusalem.

The key word here is perhaps 'contentment', a word Paul uses in Philippians 4:11. The gospel challenge is to learn to be content, for all we have is born of God's grace and generosity. Our measure is not to be what other people receive but the measure that God gives to us. So we might ask, 'What prompts our own discontent?' Is it the power of advertising that tells us what we should own, or the promise of an unsecured loan to get what we want, or comparison with those who appear to have and be more than we are?

Or, to take the image of the evil eye, which Matthew uses – how do we see these things? If we look at a beautiful piece of embroidery (and this might be a simple sermon illustration) we can either see the pattern on the top or the chaos underneath. For some there is a pattern of grace that is reflected in contentment, for others there is the disorder of unfulfilled material desires.

There is a hard lesson in this parable. The workers are told to work in a vineyard, an OT metaphor for Israel's relationship with God. The Greek word *hupagete*, translated as 'go', is used in verses 4 and 7 to send workers into the vineyard; the same word is used of their exclusion in verse 14. It is grace that calls workers into God's vineyard; it is the unwillingness or inability to be gracious and respond to such generosity that results in leaving the vineyard. Self-exclusion from the kingdom results from adopting a miserly, covetous spirit that cannot rejoice in generosity.

### **Stewardship reflections**

Of course, the question of generosity runs much deeper than simply our financial dealings: it includes our time and our talents as well as our treasure. But the parable is not told about money for no reason. Somehow money is the raw nerve of life that, when touched, sparks the most profound reaction. It is possible to feign, even to ourselves, the depth of our discipleship. But it is our attitudes and actions around money and giving that expose us as we really are. If our eyes are set on God and on thankfulness, then we may more easily learn to be content. If our eyes are set on our neighbours who have more than us, we will more readily be discontent and more inclined to grumble.

*Money gives us freedom and choice, but it cannot guarantee the quality of the choices we make.*

## Leaders

One of the key elements in the parable is the employer's claim to sovereignty over his wealth: 'am I not free to do what I will with my money?' As Paul Schervisch notes, money gives us freedom and choice, but it cannot guarantee the quality of the choices we make. The freedom of this employer is expressed in his choice to be generous and just. Would the early workers in the vineyard have made the same choice; would we? The challenge to mature Christians is to move beyond calculating what we give and discovering a new and deepening spirit of generosity, which Jesus teaches lies at the heart of kingdom life.

## Planned givers

'I have learned,' says St Paul, 'to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty' (Phil. 4:11-12). Before we can know how much to give, we have to know how much we need to live. Without contentment we will always be seeking more, and that is not fertile ground to grow generosity. Discontent is like a river periodically bursting its banks and flooding the land around it. We need to establish the channels. The discipline of setting aside an amount we wish to give to God's work through his church at the beginning of the week or month is an effective discipline. When we discipline ourselves to giving as a priority, it revolutionises our self-understanding. Before we seek for ourselves, we exercise a grateful generosity in giving. It is a reminder of who is, or should be, at the centre.

## Plate givers

Charles Swindoll tells the story of a GI in London in the later days of the war. A young boy watched wistfully as he went into a bakery to buy a pile of doughnuts. On leaving, and seeing the ragged, hungry child, the GI asked if he also would like some doughnuts – and gave him a dozen. As he walked away, he felt a tug at his greatcoat – it was the young boy: 'Hey mister, are you God?' We reflect the nature of God most when we learn to be generous. The hardest and most rewarding area in which we can learn to be generous is with our money. Making a simple definite decision to give regularly from the first of what we have and not from what is left over is to make a decision to be a little like God.

### Matt 21:33-46

(NRSV)

*'Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watch-tower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, "They will respect my son." But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, "This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance." So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?' They said to him, 'He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.'*

*Jesus said to them, 'Have you never read in the scriptures:*

*"The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes"?*

*Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.'*

*When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.*

### Suggested readings

Isaiah 5:1-7 ■ Psalm 80:8-16

This parable is the middle of three for which the central theme is criticism of the Jewish leaders. Matthew draws the substance of the parable from Mark, which is of particular interest in that it contains a specific reference to the killing of the landowner's son. Matthew's own concerns are shown in the way he edits his Markan material and in what he adds to his source.

Matthew's specific emphasis is upon judgement. In verse 34, Matthew elaborates Mark's simple phrase 'in time' into the much more forceful 'when the time of the fruits (i.e. the harvest) had come...' The verb here is *engisen*, the same verb used in Matthew of the dawning of the kingdom in 3:2, 4:17 and 10:7. Most tellingly, Matthew adds a specific reference to the removal of the kingdom from the Jews and their replacement by another people (*ethnos*), a people which will bear fruit. This emphasis is found only in Matthew's version of the parable.

The parable can be read as an allegory: the two sets of servants represent the former and latter prophets, the son represents Jesus and the landowner is God. Matthew's editing of his source notes that the son was taken outside the vineyard (which Rabbinic interpretation identified with the city of Jerusalem) before he was killed which supports this reading. It is not clear what produce the servants were sent to collect. It may be to collect rent as part of a lease agreement, or to collect the entire produce of the vineyard with the tenants, presumably, retaining a portion for their own subsistence.

It should be noted immediately, however, that this is a conservative reading of the text. On this reading a landowner is denied what is rightfully his by wicked tenants. The stewardship application is persuasive and clear: we are to give God what is rightfully his. Such teaching chimes with the teaching that God is owner and giver of all we have. But even if we accept a conservative reading of the story we should not easily conclude such a conservative and privatised stewardship application and fail to recognise the economic context of the story. There is a more radical reading of the text which reflects the perspective of the poor. On this reading the parable deals with an absent landlord, perhaps a despot (see below) for whom land is a commodity and the produce of the land taken as profit and taken away from the community and out of the country. On this reading the denial of God's ownership of the vineyard rests not with the tenants but with the landlord. The actions of the tenants may not be those

*There are consequences  
in failing to attend to the  
obligations created by  
the gift itself*

*we should not strive to  
own what is entrusted  
to us as a gift*

of wicked usurpers but the protest of those for whom land is a gift of God which blesses the community.<sup>1</sup>

Regardless of which reading we prefer the key to understanding the parable is the identification of the vineyard with Israel. The imagery is stronger than in Mt 20:1-16) Verse 33 quotes the vineyard passage in Isaiah 5:2 almost verbatim, The emphasis is on the contrast between the fullness of God's provision and his gracious choice of Israel and the self-seeking and self-serving of the human actors in the story. It may be that the tenants are indeed wicked, that they would accumulate everything to themselves and pay no honour to the owner of the vineyard. It may be that the landowner is violating the gift of land which God entrusts to his people in seizing its fullness for himself and failing to honour the gift of God. It is noteworthy that the Isaiah vineyard passage goes on to picture the houses of the rich isolated in swathes of unproductive land that they have taken from the poor (Isaiah 5:8-10). On either reading there is a violation of God's Lordship and purpose by those called to be stewards of the gift and that violation turns on wealth and our desire to hold it tightly. God's choice of Israel and the fullness of his provision form the background of a parable that ends ultimately in the removal of the kingdom from Israel.

The hard message of this parable is that grace, calling and gift are not incompatible with judgement. There are consequences in failing to attend to the obligations created by the gift itself. Matthew underlines the sovereignty of the land owner by the repeated use of 'his' (*autou*) in relation to the vineyard. He also refers to him as 'house master' (*oikodespotēs*) in verse 33, a favourite phrase that he adds to Mark's version, and later in the story refers to him as 'lord of the vineyard' (*ho kurios tou ampelōnos*). The move to collect the fruits of harvest is an assertion of lordship, for good or for ill, over the produce of the vineyard.

However we read the parable it is clear that how we handle money is either in harmony or in tension with the values of the kingdom of heaven in our daily lives. To be sure, the bible understands God as the true owner and giver of our wealth and possessions. We may well see in this parable a clear challenge to honour God with our first fruits. We should not strive to own what is entrusted to us as a gift, a warning that is candidly made in Deuteronomy chapters 6 and 8 as Israel pauses before taking possession of the land.

But we must be careful on such a reading not to so spiritualise and individualise the meaning that we lose sight of the harsh, shared experience of poverty that would be well known to Jesus' first hearers. Land is God's gift and provision to his people. It is the source of wealth, a place of family and community and a place which sustains life. Land is not there to be parcelled up, sold and resold for profit creating a gap between rich and poor. Such a gap is powerfully pictured in Isaiah 5:8-10, as much a part of the meaning of the vineyard passage as the preceding verses which stress God's loving abundant provision.

*church ministries can be hindered, made ineffective, even ended due to a failure to be adequately resourced.*

1 For a sustained reading of Matthew's Gospel from the perspective of the poor see the excellent web resource at [www.urbanmatthew.co.uk](http://www.urbanmatthew.co.uk)

## Stewardship reflections

In the parable, the vineyard is richly provided for and left in the care of tenants. This is a lovely picture of stewardship: that the God who provides what we need also extends his trust to us. The challenge is to live well with this gift, this provision. Whether our reading of this text is of wicked tenants or a rapacious landlord there will always be for us the temptation to hold tightly and possess what is given to us to hold lightly and share generously. Failure to honour God with all that is due to him, the decision to accumulate and take to ourselves what is given as a gift, is not so much the breaking of a rule as a betrayal of the trust shown to us by a God who amply supplies our needs.

## Leaders

This passage is a statement of who and what we are before God: stewards of all God has given. It is the truth behind David's words prayed at each Eucharist: 'Lord all things come from you and of your own do we give you.' The reality of the human heart is that what we are called to steward we desire to possess. The sadness is that in the desire to possess we can lose our liberty – a cage is a cage even if the bars are made of gold. Albert Schweitzer once wrote: 'if we have something that we cannot give away it is not a possession any longer – it possesses us.'

The parable goes further and we cannot escape its force. Our decision to withhold has consequences. The kingdom is taken and given to others. The reality is that church ministries can be hindered, made ineffective, even ended, due to a failure to be adequately resourced.

## Planned givers

Whichever interpretation of the text we may take either the tenants or the landlord are asserting their ownership of the produce of the vineyard. Failure to give and to give generously is more than a dereliction of external religious duty; it is an implicit statement of ownership. As Jesus himself said, what we do with our money says something about what is in our hearts. Our giving, even our tithing, does not mean the rest is ours but a reminder that everything we have comes from God.

## Plate givers

Tenants, stewards, caretakers: whatever word we use as Christians we do not own but we do benefit from the richness of what is entrusted to us. Our words around money should be those of joy, blessing, privilege and celebration. Words such as guilt, embarrassment, rules or anxiety have no place in our discussions of financial discipleship. If we withhold from God what is due to him, it is not a matter of breaking a rule but a breach of God's trust.



### Matt 22:1-14

(NRSV)

*Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: 'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. Again he sent other slaves, saying, "Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet." But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, maltreated them, and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. Then he said to his slaves, "The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet." Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.*

*'But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?" And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, "Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." For many are called, but few are chosen.'*

### Suggested readings

Isaiah 25:1-9 ■ Psalm 23

In this parable, Matthew uses material common to both Matthew and Luke but not found in Mark – and uses it with considerable freedom. In Luke, the parable concerns an evening meal thrown by a housemaster; here it is a wedding banquet for the son of a king. Matthew adapts his material to more closely correlate with the details of the preceding parables. So Luke's single servant becomes plural while the introduction of a second set of servants and mention of the murder of some servants corresponds to the parable of the Rented Vineyard. By contrast, Matthew omits Luke's account of space being found and a second invitation to the marginalised being made.

Matthew clearly has his own emphases in the recasting of this parable. He alone adds a second parable, which today reads as a slightly awkward extension referring to the casting out of a guest who did not have wedding clothes. As in preceding parables, there is an emphasis on the end times of human history – when God's purposes for, and his blessing of, Israel will be revealed. A wedding banquet was one of the images associated with the coming of the Messiah in Jewish hope. Also present is a graphic emphasis on judgement, in the destruction of the city.

Like the preceding parables, this parable turns on the sonship of Jesus. The cycle of disbelief cannot go on for ever; the teaching and ministry of Jesus standing in the line of the prophets of old requires a decision, which in itself is judgement for good or ill upon those who hear.

This particular wedding invitation is not accompanied by a polite RSVP! Declining to attend is not an option. In both the Bible (2 Sam. 10:4) and the writing of the Jewish historian Josephus, who was nearly a contemporary of Jesus, the refusal of the king's invitation is tantamount to open rebellion. The first invitation to celebrate turns upon the fact that those who receive the invitation owe their protection, their land and prosperity to the king. The second invitation carries a note of eschatological urgency, 'everything is ready'. These two invitations include an element of obligation based on blessing and promise received.

The gospel is gracious invitation but acceptance, which is itself an act of grace, implies recognition of sovereignty and, with that, appropriate obligation. Those invited reject the invitation to rejoice, to celebrate and to honour that sovereignty. Instead they focus on their business activities, rejecting the authority of the one whose



*in focusing upon the gift, we lose sight of the Giver and the call to share in the joy of his life*

*how we handle money either hinders or helps us enter the abundant life Jesus promised*

patronage is the source of their wealth and power. Matthew cuts short the polite, almost defensible, excuses offered in Luke's version of the story. The claim of lordship and the invitation to celebrate exceeds all other claims in the lives of the king's people. The danger in all discipleship is that, while pursuing that which is in itself good and right and godly, our ordinary day-to-day living, we can lose sight of that which has a higher claim upon our lives, namely the lordship of Christ. And so often it is the pursuit of business, of financial gain and accumulation of possessions that blinds us to that greater claim of lordship in our lives. In focusing upon the gift, we lose sight of the Giver and the call to share in the joy of his life.

Interestingly, the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas preserves a version of this parable in which a warning is given about trading and losing focus. Some think that the Thomas version reflects Jesus' original parable more closely than Matthew does; more likely it is an editing of a Gospel account. However, the Thomas version is an indication of how the parable actually played out in the preaching and storytelling of the early church. There would seem to be some anxiety around the tensions between the accumulation of possessions, and faithful discipleship.

For Matthew, once again the servants represent the OT prophets urging the people of Israel to return to their status and calling as God's chosen people. The Greek phrase *tous keklamenous*, translated as 'those who had been invited', is a technical term for the people of God. The servants are then sent out again, this time to the outlets of the city, not to be understood as the crossroads but the points of exit in the city walls, to seek new guests. Here too is the gracious invitation of the gospel to the marginalised but acceptance once again carries with it appropriate obligation. Surely this is the meaning of the slightly awkward parable that Matthew tags on in verses 11-14. Here a wedding guest does not have suitable clothes and is dismissed from the wedding feast into judgement. Matthew adds to Luke's version of the story that the invitation to the marginalised brought in both the good and the bad. His addition reflects the concern of the early church for discipline. The kingdom of God is an untidy business.

### Stewardship reflections

Stewardship is what we do after we say that we believe; mature stewardship acknowledges that God has a prior claim on our lives that supersedes all our priorities and preferences. This can sound harsh and can certainly be misinterpreted as a cruel form of self-denial. Jesus talks frequently about money, much more so in fact than about faith or prayer. This is not, as Carol Johnson notes, because he was obsessed by money. Rather, Jesus was obsessed by the abundant life that he promises to us. He knew that how we handle money either hinders or helps us enter the abundant life Jesus promised.

*failure to provide adequate financial resources means that church ministries are often cramped and ineffective*

*we are invited to joy; we cannot settle for less by taking it for granted*

## Leaders

Mature discipleship acknowledges God's prior claim on all areas of our lives, even those of work and family. This obligation is born of God's love for us in Jesus and the invitation is to enter into joy and to celebrate. It is perhaps all too easy for discipleship to focus on perceived obligation, and to lose its joy. All that we have is gift and grace; therefore cultivating a spirit of thankfulness is a key part of discovering and growing into joy. The discipline of planned giving is a key element in acknowledging God's lordship in a crucial area of our lives. It expresses thankfulness for all we have received. The key question is not 'how much do I give' but whether my gift truly reflects who I am and what I have received from God.

## Planned givers

It is hard to acknowledge Jesus as Lord when our own priorities are front and centre in our lives. In Luke's version of the parable, those invited offer polite excuses almost defensible under the Law of Moses. In Matthew, all that is abbreviated to the telling phrase, 'They paid no attention'. Their lives and livelihood were the first claim on their lives and it is this that prevents us from entering into the joy of our discipleship. More than that, our private choices have consequences for church. Matthews' account of soldiers sacking the city may reflect the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 or simply be literary convention, but the point is that the citizens are dealt with as the leading men of a city in rebellion. Failure to provide adequate financial resources means that church ministries are often cramped and ineffective. Money, which is a gift from God to be celebrated, becomes a burden and what should be a joyful sharing of resources between the parts of the body of Christ is transformed into a fearful, defensive and resentful calculation of how much we can afford.

## Plate givers

The heart of the parable is not the judgement of a city but the gracious and beautiful picture of an invitation to joy sent to those who never dreamed they might be invited. It is the joy of the surprise 40th birthday party, the reunion with old friends, the award for community service, recovery from serious illness, the rediscovery of life after bereavement or divorce, the job you never thought you would get, the reconciliation with a friend you thought lost for ever. The gospel invitation is all this and much, much more. We are invited to joy; we cannot settle for less by taking it for granted. Such gracious invitation requires the best that we have and the best that we are.

### Matt 22:15-22

(NRSV)

*Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, 'Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?' But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, 'Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax.' And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, 'Whose head is this, and whose title?' They answered, 'The emperor's.' Then he said to them, 'Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.' When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.*

### Suggested readings

Isaiah 45:1-7 ■ Psalms 96:1-9

In the preceding three parables, Matthew has departed from his chief source, the Gospel of Mark, but returns to Mark as he recounts the deft attempt of the religious and political leaders to trap Jesus on the legitimacy of paying taxes to Rome. This head tax (*kenson* = census) had to be paid using Roman coinage. To the obvious political implications of the question is to be added a moral – religious – concern. The Roman coin carried an image and inscription of Caesar and this was highly offensive to the Jews, as indeed was any human image. So much so that at least one rabbi, Nahum ben Simai, argued that holiness was proved by not looking at a coin bearing an image.

This double whammy of political and religious objection is mirrored in the strange pairing of Herodians and Pharisees who test Jesus with their question. The Herodians supported Herod, the puppet king under Rome, and therefore had a vested interest in the political status quo. If Jesus denied that it was right to pay taxes to Rome then they could accuse Jesus of an act of political rebellion. For their part it seems as though the Pharisees did not all agree about whether it was offensive to handle a coin which bore an image, such as the one they brought to Jesus. But despite their differences on the subject they stand to gain by exposing Jesus as one who supported paying taxes to an occupying army and also paying those taxes with a coin that bore a secular image of the occupying power. Certainly the temple tax which supported the priests and the temple could not be paid in Roman coin.

Jesus answer is both subtle and brilliant, in that it defuses a dangerous situation and makes a telling point against his opponents. Again we see the rabbinic custom of answering question by question. To understand the answer we need to give some ground first. Jesus effectively states that taxes are to be paid, just as Paul would later affirm the legitimacy of prayer for, and taxes paid to, secular authorities, who hold any authority they have only under God (Rom. 13:1-6). However, the payment of tax to one who has the authority to require it does not of itself authenticate the legitimacy of that authority. We have much richer choices than the extremes of political revolution or other-worldly piety, which the Jewish leaders try to offer to Jesus. Our bank is part of the immoral western refusal to cancel third-world debt, mis-selling products, profiting from indebtedness and much more. But its stock market performance helps pay our pensions; it employs people; and keeping money under the mattress is not a safe option. Part of the richness of choice

*money always bears  
someone's image and  
the temptation is  
to want it to bear  
our own*

we have is to know what can be achieved now and what cannot. What is very interesting is that, in Luke's version of Jesus' trial, one of the key charges against him is that he urged the non-payment of taxes to Rome. This gives us some idea of how Jesus' attitude left its mark in Gospel tradition.

The power of Jesus reply lies in his use of an *argumento e minore* – acknowledging a less important point to illustrate a greater principle. In Jesus' day, monetary exchange, though significant, was not as dominant a factor in human life and social exchange as it is today. The passage contains a significant play on words: is it right to give taxes (*dounai*) to Caesar? Give back (*apodounai*) to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. The Greek verb 'give back' is used of the repayment of a debt and implies obligation. If the coin belongs to Caesar, then let him have it, in the limited sphere in which he has authority. But render to God the things of God (*ta tou Theou*) in the totality of your obligations to him. The argument progresses from the limited and dubious authority of Caesar to acknowledgement of the totality of God's claim, which in and of itself relativises the authority of Caesar.

### Stewardship reflection

In one sense it is true that money is simply a neutral medium of exchange, neither good nor bad. But in another sense, money is never morally neutral; it always reflects someone's values in the way it is used. Two factors need to be borne in mind. First, that my unrestricted exercise of the freedom of choice that money can offer may be oppressive to others. Second, over time, money has become (in most cultures) the primary means of human exchange. It has become increasingly sophisticated and impersonal and the ends it serves more remote from how we earn our living. Money always bears someone's image and the temptation is to want it to bear our own. Neither handling an image, nor paying tax, compromises our true freedom. But we do not find freedom by swapping Caesar's face for our own.

### Leaders

American dollar bills bear the inscription 'In God we trust'; they also carry a picture of George Washington. There is a double challenge here. Does the use of our money in the day-to-day world of George Washington and taxes reflect the truth that God has ultimate ownership and authority and that we trust in him? To give in a planned, thoughtful manner that is proportionate to our income is a statement of trust. But we need also to ask a deeper question – whose face is on our money? It should not be ours. We should receive what we have as a gift and live generously, receive what we have as grace, and live graciously. It is then that we enter into the joy and the freedom of giving.

*there is no area of life,  
certainly not money,  
that is outside the  
sovereignty of God*

### Planned givers

Honouring God in all the things of God includes our money. But it is a sensitive area and one that has a tendency to provoke extremes of reaction. Some object to the idea of discussing money; others fall into the perils of prosperity teaching. For some, money must be hoarded in quantity; others are embarrassed by what they have. Self-seeking and guilt are equally poor conductors of grace in this area of giving.

The pound coin has a Latin inscription along the side: *Decus et tutamen*, which means 'an ornament and a safeguard'. This inscription goes back as early as 1662 and was put on the side of the coin as evidence or safeguard that the coin had not been clipped. The value of a coin could be reduced by shaving the precious metal off the side of the coin!

Planned giving is the safeguard, the *tutamen*, that we *do* render to God all that is God's in the area of financial discipleship. When we do not review our planned giving, it is akin to shaving or clipping the value of what we give to God.

### Plate givers

Because the tax coin bore Caesar's image, some religious people did not want to touch it. Today, people often want to keep financial matters private and separate from their faith. We have to handle money; the question is how we do it. If we fail to teach our children about the important things in life, it does not mean that they do not learn, it simply means that they will learn about it from someone else. Those values may well not be ones we want for our kids. The story of Caesar's coin reminds us that there is no area of life, certainly not money, that is outside the sovereignty of God. We cannot privatise our money as though it has nothing to do with our faith. The church does need money for the good things it does. But we talk money, not because of those needs, but because we need to be faithful and generous with the money God has entrusted to us.