

Worship Through Generosity – Tithe

Psalm 62

2 Corinthians 8: 1-15

This morning we are continuing our series on worship, and we are on part two of “Worship Through Generosity”

Last week we began by thinking about what it means to give our all to God. How do we get to the point where we are daily willing to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Jesus? The key points in that talk were:

Fact – the Christian life is not a problem free life.

But – we still need to be sold out for God.

How – by doing it together and ‘With’ the Spirit.

Today, we are on to tithe – or the giving of our money. Why is this so hard to tackle? Why is this the topic that always mean I risk upsetting people? It shouldn’t be. Jesus talked about money more than anything else. I am not asking you for money. You are asking yourselves for money. The church needs money to run, you are the church and so you are essentially asking yourselves for money. Today we need to think about whether we are each playing our part, living sacrificially and giving our all to God when it comes to our finances and worshipping him through generosity with our giving.

I was so tempted to find another video to put on so that someone else could do the hard part, but then I realised I am pretty sure we can handle this together.

Let me begin by saying – we are not in financial crisis. This is not going to be a hard hitting, guilt inducing talk on this. I never think that works anyway. The reality is we are doing ok. We are breaking even this year. That’s good, but is it good enough? One of the reasons we have managed to break even is because we have cut costs particularly in the areas of staffing and buildings. But, this is not sustainable, we want to be able to increase our staffing in the area of Children and Families and have a full time minister in that area the same as we do with the youth. We have been told we will not get an Associate Minister for this parish for at least the next four years, so do we want to invest in a communities worker to be a lay pioneer? What about the fact that you previously had two full time ordained clergy and now only have one, what happens to all the workload that was being done? We may get a pioneer curate from next summer but there is no guarantee of that it is dependent on there being a suitable match – it is not something we can advertise for. Our relatively low levels of spending on our buildings cannot continue, we need to be investing in our buildings and maintaining them. Otherwise we will end up need to do a major repairs campaign or we will lose hirers as the facilities will age over time with wear and tear. As I explained in my email this week we are looking separately at St Stephen’s and want to take seriously what we do with that building and site, because we cannot just neglect it and we need to do some major works at the very least in order to still have a useable building.

So, we are not in crisis. We will finish this year with the reserves we need in order to meet our charity commission obligations. But, our first draft of the budget for next year shows a deficit of at least £15k and that is only maintaining the status quo, not increasing staffing and not doing any substantial repairs or maintenance tasks. We have reduced costs where we can, we are doing our best to maximise revenue from our hall rentals and we will investigate grants. It costs approximately £20k per month to run our church and pay the bills for insurance, utilities, wages etc.... If you want all the details of our costs then we can send you our accounts and Oliver our Treasurer will answer any questions you have.

The reality is though that in order for us to plan for growth and more works then we need to see a significant increase in our regular giving. The good news is that what we raise from our gift day will all be used for future mission, growth and works and will not be needed to ensure we do not end this year in deficit. This is a significant change from previous years and thanks to the hard work of the finance team, the staff team and the churchwardens. So, I want us to turn to the reading we had from 2 Corinthians. In many ways Paul’s teaching is so simple. If a farmer only sows seed over a tiny area – or over a wide area but incredibly sparingly, then the crop they receive won’t begin to sustain and nourish them. While if a farmer sows seed generously and over a wider area, the resulting crop will be superb.

But what’s so obvious in an agricultural sense isn’t always so obvious when it comes to our lives. Of course, we know people who we’re drawn to: and part of their attraction for us is that they’re unusually generous in the time they give us, the love they show us, their open-hearted approach towards us. They sow seeds of words of encouragement, positive comments, affirming statements. We can see how they’re sowing generously – and remarkably they seem to be reaping generously too in terms of the peace and radiance they generate. But there’s so much pressure today to live for ourselves, to protect ourselves from stress, to shop till we drop, to build up our investment portfolios, to maximise our pensions – that the idea of generous living and generous giving can so easily go out the window. It’s not that it’s wrong to protect ourselves from undue stress at times. It’s not that it’s wrong to make some provision for our futures and our families. But so easily we end up sowing our seed in a tiny area centred on ourselves, while occasionally responding to a charitable appeal by randomly throwing the odd seed out a little further afield.

There is a spiritual dynamic that when we sow generously we reap generously.

The context of today’s reading was a collection which Paul was getting together: probably the same collection that we read of elsewhere in his letters, to supply the needs of the church in Jerusalem. The church in Jerusalem was under constant harassment from the Jewish authorities. There’d also been a famine there, making things still more difficult. And Paul had taken it on himself to appeal to the Greek-speaking churches in wealthy cities like Corinth to help out their poorer brethren in the city where it all started.

We are wealthy. Not because we live in Balham that does not necessarily make us rich I get that. We are rich because we have food in our cupboards, clothes on our bodies and in our cupboards at home, we have cars, phones, computers, make up, perfume and gadgets in drawers and cupboards we will never use.

I wonder though if sometimes we have more confidence when we have savings in our bank account than we do in God. Having money gives us a sense of certainty, of security of knowing we can do more, be more, achieve more? Paul, in a style that is not unusual for him, is pretty blunt about this. In his first letter to Timothy (6:17-18) he says we should not be arrogant, we should not set our hopes on wealth, but instead in the generous God who gives everything to us. We have to see beyond what we have to see the One who enabled us to have it.

Pauls says we are “to do good, to be rich in good deeds, generous and ready to share.” Are we ready to be those kind of people? Is that our hearts desire? Are we willing to commit the time needed to do good deeds and the money needed for us to be generous and not just nominal in our giving?

The first principle of our giving it that is should be generous, extravagant and a joy. We should desire to be abundant in our giving and not trying to give the minimum possible. Whether this is time, effort or money. We should be able to do this because we trust in God, because we set our hopes on Him rather than on the uncertainty of our riches. We recognise that we have what we have because God has blessed us and so if we are obedient and share those blessings with others God will make sure we still have enough for our needs.

The features of generous living and generous giving are beautifully spelt out in our passage. In v.7, we’re taught that generosity and spontaneity are two different things: that’s it’s perfectly compatible with a generous lifestyle to think carefully about what we should give, not just to act on the spur of the moment. Later in that verse we learn that true generosity doesn’t spring from reluctance or compulsion, but from a cheerful heart: for true giving is a real grace, a delight, a liberation, not something heavy and depressing and legalistic. And right at the end of the passage we are given the best motivation in the world for generous giving: *‘Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!’*; or, as Paul puts it still more movingly the chapter before:

‘You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich’.

The blessings of generous giving are spelt out too in this passage. In v.8 we have the harvest principle – and notice the repetition of the little word ‘all’.

It’s true of the generous farmer – it’s also true of the generous giver, that: *“God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.*

V.11 says much the same – and this time note the repetition of the little word every: *“You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.”*

It’s true, of course that we give partly to bless those whom we’re giving to: and Paul acknowledges that in v.12. But just as significantly, giving also blesses us. For sowing sparingly will never nourish our spirits. Sowing sparingly will never develop our full God-given potential. Sowing sparingly will never lead to life in all its fullness. We need to learn the grace of generous living and generous giving. We are called to worship God through the generous giving of ourselves, our time and our money.

God is not mean with the blessings he gives to us. God does not think about what the minimum is that he can get away with giving to us. Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians, “God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.”

God is extravagantly generous in what He gives to us. Paul says we will be “enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion”. Now, do not get me wrong, I do not have any time for any ideas that we can buy God’s favour or blessing. Nowhere does it say blessed are the rich and those who give most as they will get the best seats in Heaven. We do not give to get favours, we give to model the kind of love that God has for us. We give cheerfully, and not out of reluctance or compulsion, but because we want to. Because we are so grateful for all God has given us, so full of thanksgiving that we want to share that blessing with others. What Paul tells us is that when we do that, when we are able to bless others, then we will be enriched because generosity will bring forth praise of God from others and through that we will be blessed.

Please review your own giving, thoughtfully and prayerfully. We have 55 households who give regularly through standing order, envelopes or a regular annual donation. However, we are reliant on just 5 of our households (9%) for 41% of our income. This places us in a risky financial position if just one of those households were to move on. If we add in 5 more households then we are reliant on 10 households (18%) for 55% of our income. At the other end of the scale 50% of our households are responsible for only 14% of our total giving.

We are family and I know we cannot all give equal amounts, but I do believe we all need to give seriously and sacrificially. In other passages I believe that the Bible is quite clear and that we should be prepared to give 10% of our income to the church. Whilst I personally follow that principle the good news is the Church of England asks for only a 5% tithe and so you already get 50% off! Though they do suggest you give a further 5% to charity. If everyone in our church reached the point where they were giving at least 5% of their income our church finances would be transformed. However, if you could give 10% we would of course be delighted and able to do even more in our community. I am not going to debate if that 10% should be before or after tax, NI and pension deductions, we should all

be striving to be as generous as we can and not think about the minimum we can give, but the maximum.

If you are currently giving to the church, please consider how far away you are from the biblical principle of tithing and whether you could please increase your current giving

Last week at the end of the service we distributed these booklets and I have emailed them out as well and there are more hard copies available at the back.. This is your opportunity to think and pray through all we have covered in the last two weeks and to decide what your response will be. All the roles in church we need help with or would like to develop are listed. Please take time to think about what talents and time you could offer, what could you commit to. Could it be something on a Sunday morning and one other role as well? You can offer more than one role. There are two response forms that I ask everyone to please complete and then return next Sunday. You can return them via the office, through the Vicarage door or bring them back next Sunday. Please complete one, even if for you nothing is changing at this current time.

I know there will already be some of you uncomfortable with what I am saying. Feeling aggrieved because either you feel got at, or because you feel you give enough, or that you do not need the pressure of being asked for more. If that is you, then I ask again what I asked when I first arrived here. Please come and talk to me, please don't talk about me or allow others to grumble to you either. Please don't mishear or misunderstand what I am saying. Please take time to read the letter and we will also send out this talk in the week so you can read it and reflect on it too.

The thing is, this is not about me and what I am saying. These principles are not mine, they are God's. They are rooted in His word. They might make us feel uncomfortable, but nobody ever said being a Christian was comfortable.

We want to be known by love, we want to reach out to those in the community. We need to begin by loving our own church and loving it sufficiently that we are prepared to be generous our time, our talents and our money. It is the prayer I have been praying this week as I have prepared for today. That I will not be overwhelmed by the ask I need to make this morning. After all, it is not really my ask. It is our ask. Our church, our vision, our mission, our bills, our ask.

Let me finish with the challenge from St. Paul once again: not a challenge about the odd giving talk, which comes along in Church life every year or request for help which happens frequently, but a challenge about every day, about the way God's Spirit is seeking to transform the whole of our lives, encouraging us to give sacrificially of our time, our talents and our tithe. *"Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously."* Let's start today by stepping out in generous, believing faith.