

**2 September 2018**

**Sermon by Diana Hall**

**James 1:17-end; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23**

### **Everything we have comes from You...**

Who can tell me what Richard Branson, David Sainsbury, Ann Gloag and Bill Gates have in common?

Well, apart from the fact that they're billionaires, each of them is a signatory to the Giving Pledge. The Giving Pledge is an invitation for billionaires promise publicly to dedicate the majority of their wealth to philanthropy. It aims over time to help shift the social norms of philanthropy toward giving more, giving sooner, and giving smarter, to make the world a better place.

This morning, and throughout September we're going to take a deep breath together and look at the whole area of giving. This won't be the only time we do this exercise. It's important for us to stop and reflect on it together on a regular basis. Giving is an aspect of Christian discipleship that can help us unlock new depth in our faith. It deserves attention. So, over the next few weeks we'll look at giving in many different forms, considering what the Bible has to say about to whom, what, where, when, and why we should give.

This is partly but not only, about money. What we do with our skills, gifts and time, also matters. We're dedicating the morning of Saturday 15<sup>th</sup> September to looking at that together, so I hope that everyone will be able to come to the event then.

But today, without apology, I'm going to talk specifically about money. The bible has a lot to say about it. There are around 500 bible verses on prayer, but over 2,000 verses dealing with money and possessions – which suggests it's an important topic. But at a time when charities are increasingly stepping in to fill gaps where there was once state help for those in need in the UK, we might well ask what if anything is distinctive about Christian giving? I want to suggest that there is.

Our help in thinking about this today comes from Book of James. It explores several themes for Christian Living as a whole. Later in the month we'll be looking at Responsibility, Wisdom and Prayer in giving, that I hope will create space for individually and corporately to pause and reflect on our own giving.

This morning, though I'm going to talk about Gratitude and Generosity.

Some very basic background about the Book of James: it isn't entirely clear who wrote it. There's a strong but disputed tradition that it was James was the brother of Jesus. But whatever the authorship, what *is* clear is that by drawing on a combination of ancient Hebrew teaching from Proverbs and beyond, set in the light of the life, death and resurrection of James is out to help us answer the question: "What does it mean to live as a Christian?" It's a letter about faith-informed action.

If you remember back to when we started reading Ephesians together all those weeks ago, we saw that Paul teaches there that the starting point for growing up into mature people of faith is to have a vision and appreciation of how awesome God is, and of how everything starts with God. Well James too thinks this is absolutely crucial, reminding us:

James 1:17 *“Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights.”* Everything we have comes from God. God never changes. And then verse 18 says *“In fulfilment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.”*

The starting point for our lives is a recognition not only that we were created by God, but that *everything* comes from God. The natural world and everything else too: the clothes we’re wearing, the keys in our pockets, the furniture in our houses, our cars, homes ... and yes, even our bank balance. All of these come from, and belong first and foremost to God. God’s gifts are good and complete. Everything we have is gift.

Money is an emotive subject. I wonder, when you think about money, how you feel? Perhaps already uncomfortable with this talk – maybe you feel strongly that your money is your business and no-one else’s. Maybe you’re anxious because you’re struggling to pay a bill. Perhaps you’re resentful that you’ve not got money as much as someone else. Or maybe you long to have just a bit more. Maybe you’re surprised and pleased because you have more money than you ever expected. We all react to money in different ways, and we feel under all sorts of different pressures from different sources about money.

But what if we start our thinking about money by remembering that it’s a gift? I don’t know about you, but for me, that changes things. Because suddenly I can see that whatever I have flows out of the **generosity** of God. God is the one who gives what I have. And giving is a response to that.

Giving is one of the primary activities of God. “For God so loved the world that he *“gave”* his only begotten son” (John 3:16). Giving is a godly activity, and generous giving was one of the things that marked the earliest Christians out from those around them. In Acts we hear that the followers of Jesus were generous. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus teaches explicitly on giving. Giving, and giving generously, is a distinctive thing about Christians.

The New testament teaches us to give in a spirit of generosity and joy. In 2 Corinthians 9 Paul says that the Lord loves a “joyful” giver. The Greek word could even be translated as a “hilarious”!

I wonder if giving makes you joyful? What would it be like if we felt that way about it!? Laughter as we poured our cash into the basket on a Sunday morning! That’s how it’s supposed to be! But I wonder how you feel about giving? Do you give because you feel obliged? That’s not what it’s about. Don’t give because you ought, because it’s a duty. Give out of your free will, because you’re grateful to God – because giving

is the natural response to having received from God, and a way to reflect God's character in your life.

For many of us giving isn't a habit we've formed. Things get in the way. We get attached to spending on material goods, or we accumulate debt, and suddenly a VISA bill or a mortgage provider, a holiday or the next round of Christmas or Birthday presents are our main priority.

In this morning's passage James refers to us as God's "first fruits". This is the Old Testament term for our prime "stuff" – the best of the harvest and herd, given by God and therefore given back to him, proportionately, by a tithe offering. As humans, we are God's first fruits. He has invested everything in us, giving us life itself, all that we have, and the promise of eternal life in Jesus Christ.

What would it look like for us to give of *our* first fruits?

This is what a devout Jew would do in the ancient world, and what the Bible instructs in the Old Testament Law – tithing. And although many think of tithing as being 10% of income, it was actually much more than that. The first Tithe was 10% to go towards the upkeep of the temple and the priest. Then they would give another 10% at a major festival during the year. And more still would be given as alms. Overall the baseline worked out about 23% a year. And that's a baseline not a ceiling.

Sounds sacrificial, doesn't it? In fact I think *sacrificial* giving is part of the point. God's gift to us in Jesus is sacrificial, after all. And the world still needs people to give sacrificially.

You may or may not know already that Scottish Episcopal Church Congregations are run entirely out of what you and I, the community, give. Wages, buildings, but more importantly – outreach and mission: everything we do with children, in schools, in the wider community and on Sundays – and everything that we *want to build* together to share Jesus with Dunbar and beyond, has to be paid for out of what we give. All of it.

Go back to that idea of first fruits for a moment – of giving your best to God. What would it look like for us to turn our view of our money on its head and to say "Lord, all of this is yours. The first line of my outgoings – before my mortgage or my electricity bill, is going to be given over to you? What would it look like for us to re-evaluate our spending priorities to make giving to God (willingly and cheerfully!) our first priority rather than an afterthought? Wouldn't it be great if our offering each Sunday was a moment of rejoicing?!

The Old Testament tithing teaching isn't a black and white rule... but it's the best and only concrete guidance we have in the Bible or in church tradition about what appropriate giving might look like.

Giving is a spiritual practice: part of developing a life of loving response, gratitude, generosity and care to God and our neighbour. It's about taking seriously what God has given to us, and entrusting it back to God's care believing that we'll be provided for. It's risky... but it's also liberating.

Bill & Melinda Gates say of their decision to give away billions: “We have been blessed with good fortune beyond our wildest expectations, and we are profoundly grateful. But just as these gifts are great, so we feel a great responsibility to use them well.”

For my part, if I’m honest I’m not great with money. It’s one of my weak points. But I think the teaching of generosity together with the ancient principle of starting with 10% of my income is a good guide. Overall I give about 12%-14% of my income – to church and elsewhere. And giving 10% of my income to St Anne’s puts me in the top 6 givers in the whole church.

Now I’m not about to stand here and tell you what to give. I don’t know and I don’t want to know. That’s between you and God. What’s sacrificial for one person might be a drop in the ocean for another. And in the end, the conversation about giving isn’t fundamentally a conversation about £, shilling and pence. It’s about principles of generosity and self-sacrifice. The question is whether you are giving as *you* should in your circumstances.

John Wesley said that the last thing to be converted in a person was their wallet. And that is true for many of us. We don’t give as we should. If everyone did so, there wouldn’t be a cause anywhere that lacked what it needs.

The point of talking about financial giving absolutely is NOT to create pressure and guilt – what you give is a matter between you and God. But as your priest it’s my role to invite us to examine our relationship with money as part of our relationship with God.

The book of James is all about faith in action – and our actions with our money are as important as anything else. And the Gospel teaches us that where our treasure is, there our heart will be also.

So in these next few weeks let me encourage you to look at your relationship with money. Review how your faith influences your decisions about money. Pray, be wise, and to consider your options.

My prayer for us through this month is that as we review our finances we would find new freedom with God; experience the release that can come with putting God in control; and learn that obedience, generosity and trusting God will draw us deeper into the love of the One from whom every good gift comes.

Amen.