

March 20th 2011: Non-Negotiable—Giving: Mark 12:35-44

I have been to a few churches in my time where the sermon has been on giving, and I must admit I always squirm when I hear the subject. The reason for that is because the ones on giving that I remember most are the really bad ones. The pre-offering sermon where you end up feeling guilty if you give, because you are now sure that it's not enough, and guilty if you don't. I recall one occasion when the Pastor after berating us about the need to give suggested that if we had a credit card on us we had no excuse not to, because they had credit card slips on hand—and then proceeded to quote from memory all his credit card details to show how easy it was for anyone to give. My biggest regret was that I wasn't quick enough to write down his details and fill in a form in his name.

Well if you feel the same about such sermons I have some bad news for you today, because the non-negotiable we are looking at this morning is GIVING.

The reason I present giving as a non-negotiable for the believer is because it is the way that God has worked with His people from the very beginning. He has called His people to give gifts to Him, poured into His work, as an expression of their love and gratitude, and also because that is one of the main ways he has chosen to bless us.

The history of giving to God begins in the Old Testament with the story of Cain and Abel. The Hebrew word for offering that is used in that story(Genesis 4) is not the regular word for a sacrifice. Indeed it can as easily mean gift. And from that early account we can immediately see that God does look for more than the gift. He looks at the heart of the giver and the feelings of love; of wanting to please Him that precede the gift.

Throughout the rest of the history of God's people up to Christ, God was still desiring more than just the gift, but with the coming of the ceremonial law and the need for Priests and Levites, the gift given to God took on a whole new significance. It became the payment for those whose lives were given over to fulfilling the worship requirements that God required from His people. Consequently it was instituted into the law as a requirement, and like a tax it was set as a tithe or tenth of all they received.

It was never meant to be simply a payment that had to be made however. God always wanted them to see giving as a response to all the blessings He poured out upon them. As an expression of their love.

That I believe is what lays behind the rebuke that the Lord gave through His prophet Malachi to His people as recorded in Malachi chapter 3. God accuses them as robbing Him in the matter of their tithes and offerings because they had begun to see their giving as a compulsion—as a duty—rather than an act of love and devotion. Consequently they were using every trick in the book to avoid giving all that they knew they should give, while at the same time looking as though they were good givers.

Something like the man who went Christmas shopping but everything he saw was too expensive except a \$50 vase that was on sale for \$2 because the handle had broken off. He bought it and had the salesman ship it by mail so that his friend would think he had paid \$50 for it and that it had been broken in shipment. A week after Christmas he received a thank you note from his friend. "Thank you for the lovely vase," his letter said. "It was so nice of you to wrap each piece separately."

In Malachi's day the majority of the Jews thought they were fooling everyone, including God, by treating their giving as a compulsory act that they were allowed to make as painless as possible. God wanted them to realize that whatever amount they brought as their tithes and offerings it would never be the full amount if it was not brought out of love and thankfulness without a dwelling upon the cost. If it wasn't freely given in love, then they robbed themselves of the blessings of God.

So God proclaims in Malachi 3:10

Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it.

When we come to the New Testament the word tithe is hardly found. The Jewish Temple with its system of Levites and Priests fade away and the tithe as a tax under the ceremonial law is no longer relevant for the Christian. But it is still relevant as a God given guide for our giving. A tenth of all we have, given back to God is a very small amount compared to all He has given us. It is however a large enough part to make such a gift an act of faith on our part. We trust God to enable us to live well on the nine tenths that we retain and He does. And when we feel led to stretch our giving beyond the tenth, God increases His blessings to us, and our contentment with what we have increases too.

The other factor that still makes the tithe relevant for believers today is that it is still God's way of providing for His workers. Even as the tithe paid the wages of the Levites and the Priest and the upkeep of the Temple, so through the tithes of God's people the work of the kingdom on earth is funded, and those who feel called to give themselves wholly to God's work are supported. People like John Palandri who relies on the gifts of God's people like you and me, for his salary. The mathematics make so much sense don't they. Ten supporting one; or maybe 15 supporting one plus the cost associated with the work they do.

The preacher and author, W A Criswell wrote:

A man was asked, "What did you do yesterday?" He replied, "Yesterday I taught a class in the Criswell College. On Tuesday I was down in the Rio Grande Valley working in Vacation Bible School. On Wednesday I was operating in our Baptist hospital in Nigeria. On Thursday I was teaching the Word of God in the Amazon jungle. On Friday I was building a church house in the Philippines. On Saturday I was preaching on the streets in the Japanese capital of Tokyo." The friend exclaimed, "Man, even in this jet age you cannot do that!" The fellow said, "But I do it every day. I dedicate to the Lord a gift in the First Baptist Church in Dallas, and it goes all over the earth doing good for Jesus."

But having said that the emphasis of Jesus and the teaching of the New Testament was not so much on the amount given, as on the love, the thankfulness, and the sacrificial faith that was behind the gift. Things that only God saw. As is often said, You can give without loving, but you can't love without giving.

That's what the account of the poor widow in our Bible reading from Mark 12:41-42 was all about.

Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts.

We discover Jesus sitting in a place in the court of the Temple where He could watch people putting their money into the temple treasury. He saw many rich people throwing in large amounts. In fact we are told that there were 13 containers set up in the court of the women to receive these offerings. They had large mouth like openings so when the scripture says that they threw in large amounts, it means exactly that. If you had money to give, then you would flaunt it.

But then the passage goes on to tell us:-

⁴² But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a fraction of a penny.

I came across this picture that someone had painted of the scene as they saw it. We see Jesus looking on and talking with His disciples. We see the rich in the background putting in their money. But the big surprise for me was the widow. A mum with a baby. And of course in those days there were many widows who were still young—whose husbands died leaving them with families to raise. And it's quite possible that this widow, who gave out of all she had to live on, had other mouths to feed. And Jesus said that she put in more than all the others, because her gift included thankfulness, love, and faith in God to provide her needs. They are the things that count as far as God is concerned.

Paul carried on that same emphasis regarding giving when he wrote to the Corinthian believers in 2 Corinthians 9

He wrote to a group of believers who were already known for their generous giving: 2 Cor 9:1-2

¹ There is no need for me to write to you about this service to the saints. ² For I know your eagerness to help, and I have been boasting about it to the Macedonians, telling them that since last year you in Achaia were ready to give; and your enthusiasm has stirred most of them to action.

In like manner I am thankful to God that I can speak to you this morning knowing that generosity in giving has always been a focus of this fellowship.

Yet that did not stop Paul from reminding them of the following:

1. That our giving should be a matter of the heart and not the rule book:

⁷ Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

2. That if we want to see God's work prosper than we must be ready to give abundantly:

⁶ Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.

3. That God is no man's debtor but will look after your every need:

⁸ And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.

4. Others will praise God because of your obedience in giving:

¹³ Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, men will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else.

5. When we think of the gift that God has given us, anything we give is just another way of saying 'thank you':

¹⁵ Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

There is plenty more that could be said about giving and, no doubt, could be presented in a very moving way. But I just want to end this morning with the following illustration based on the film 'Schindler's List'.

The film Schindler's List chronicled the heroic efforts of a German industrialist who through his unselfish activities saved over a thousand Jews from being put to death by the Germans. He used his money to buy Jews to work in his factory which was supposed to be part of the military machine of Germany. On one hand he was buying as many Jews as he could, and on the other hand he was deliberately sabotaging the ammunition produced in his factory. He entered the war as a wealthy industrialist; by the end of the war he was basically bankrupt.

When the Germans surrendered, Schindler met with his workers and declared that at midnight they were all to go free. Then followed the most emotional scene of the film. As Schindler said goodbye to the financial manager of the plant, a good friend and a Jew, he embraced him and sobbing said, "I could have done more." He looked at his car and asked, "Why did I save this? I could have bought 10 Jews with this." Taking another small possession he cried, "This would have saved another one. Why didn't I do more?"

One day Jesus will return. It will not matter then how much super we have or how big our house is. Only what we have done with what He entrusted to us for the cause of Christ will matter.

