

2 Corinthians 8:1-9 (page 1162 of pew Bibles)

Mark 12:41-44 (page 1018 of pew Bibles)

Gracious God... *your Word is more precious than fine gold, and sweeter than purest honey. As we turn to your Scripture, send your Holy Spirit to reveal the truth and grace of your word— so that the good news of your love would shine before our eyes and delight our senses ... so that we cannot help but respond with wonder, faith and trust. Amen.*

Talking about money in church is difficult. Let me tell you at least two of the reasons why.

Firstly- money is a very personal subject. It's considered borderline taboo to talk about- because how we choose to spend our money is considered private, but also because we'll have different levels of income. I know that many of us will be concerned about making ends meet, that each month is a balancing act between income and expenditure; I know that many of us are a lot more comfortable, even affluent, and won't be worrying too much about the bills.

Secondly- when you get a church leader talking about money, there's always the danger of hidden dynamics about church finances. Is this sermon really about the church accounts? Have we chosen to preach on money because the church needs cash? True story- a minister friend of mine (far away from here) was once told by his churchwardens '*we need to raise an extra £5000 a year to make our vision work- so preach for that on vision Sunday*'; that's not putting God's word, or people's hearts first.

Full disclosure- I'd welcome it if today and next week's sermons lead to an increase in regular giving to the church. I believe that God does call us to give money to the particular church that we belong to- but I want it to be for the right reasons, as I'll share below. And worth saying that *I don't know, and I'm not allowed to know who gives what- important safety mechanism.*

The starting point for talking about money today is not the balance sheet of the church, but it's our own discipleship. Jesus cares about your wallet because he cares about your heart.

Jesus says in Matthew's Gospel, Sermon on the Mount- '*where your treasure is, your heart will be there also*'. The way we choose to spend our money is an indication of what we find valuable, and so in that way it is an essential part of our character. How we spend our money shows what is valuable to us.

Our two Bible readings today show what happens when a heart is so arranged around the Gospel that everything- including our money- gets touched.

Let's take the Gospel reading- the widow at the temple. It's hard for us to picture from here quite how big a deal the temple was for the Jewish people at that time- it was vastly bigger than any other building around Jerusalem, towering over the landscape and the imagination. It was the centre of every kind of public life- political, religious, financial. A place of huge wealth.

Mark describes the large crowds donating into the boxes, many rich people extravagantly demonstrating their wealth. Amidst that noise and chaos, an unnoticeable clink of a couple of pence, a poor widow slipping away. As the treasurer team counts up later that day- would those tuppence even have registered? Did anyone notice her?

Jesus noticed her. Jesus could see what was going on here. In the temple accounts, this was minimal, yet in the book of life, *in reality*, this was a vast, lavish sum. He gathers his disciples around him- and points her out. What's different about her? Can you see? Vs 44? The others give out of their wealth- she gives out of her poverty. The widow will have had to make hard choices in order to give that money.

Many of the other givers, particularly the wealthy, won't have had to have made hard decisions. They gave out of their extra. With Jesus, the value of a gift is not the amount given, but the cost to the giver. A good question to ask of your giving and generosity- does it affect your lifestyle?

A second example- 2 Corinthians 8. Paul wants to encourage the church in Corinth to give generously. Paul doesn't start with a request, he starts with an example- the church in Macedonia.

Paul shares the story of their collection for the other churches. Notice in verse 1- *'the grace God has given them'*- this generosity is a gift from God. *'In severe trial, their overflowing joy and extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity'*. That's an odd equation isn't it? overflowing joy + extreme poverty = rich generosity. The Macedonian church experienced 'down to the depth poverty'- 'rock bottom' and yet gave as much as they were able, in fact. There isn't a hint that this was reckless. They worked out what they could comfortably give away- and went beyond that. Verse 4 suggests that they urgently pleaded to

give the cash, they begged to be involved. They were suffering persecution for their faith- their bank statements would have given them away.

Paul could go down the route of Tax and Membership fees- here's what you have to pay to be part of the group. Pay up or you're out. This is how much it costs to be a member of the church.

Another thing you could try is manipulation- that's a good way to get money out of people. Make an advert that tugs on the heartstrings or makes you feel sentimental or inspired. Give a rousing speech that's low on content but high in feel-good platitudes. *We get Christian versions of this- sell you the vision of how we're going to transform Sutton and change the world if only you give enough cash to the church.* Or tell you –and this actually happens in so-called Christian churches- that if you give your money to the church, God will bless you by making you even richer.

Instead- Paul pulls it back to the Gospel- because money is like any other part of life, the starting point has to be the good news of who Jesus is, and what he has done for us. Verse 9- *For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.* I want to briefly look at three ways the Gospel changes how you give your money away-

Firstly- The Gospel gives us true belonging. We live in a fractured world, *in the West in particular*, we have very little real sense of belonging- our individualism tends to pull us apart from one another. I have my life, my choices- and you have yours. And yet in every time and place in the churches history, belonging to one another in Christ has been something the world has noticed.

In Christ, we belong to each other Acts 2 shows ⁴² *They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.* ⁴³ *Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles.* ⁴⁴ *All the believers were together and had everything in common.* ⁴⁵ *They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need.*

Rodney Stark: *Christianity served as a revitalization movement that arose in response to the misery, chaos, fear, and brutality of life in the urban Greco-Roman world. . . . Christianity revitalized life in Greco-Roman cities by providing new norms and new kinds of social relationships able to cope with many urgent problems. To cities filled with the homeless and impoverished, Christianity offered charity as well as hope. To cities filled with newcomers and strangers, Christianity offered an immediate basis for attachment. To cities filled with orphans and widows, Christianity provided a new and expanded sense of family. To cities torn by violent ethnic strife, Christianity offered a new basis for social solidarity. And to cities faced with epidemics, fire, and earthquakes, Christianity offered effective nursing services. . . . For what they brought was not simply an urban movement, but a new culture capable of making life in Greco-Roman cities more tolerable."*

We don't belong to 'the church' in an abstract, universal way- we belong to *a* church, *a* body of people. And belonging involves sharing what we have. And the world notices.

Second- the Gospel is **total**.

In Phillipians, Paul says *'let your attitude be like that of Christ Jesus', who was in very nature God, but made himself nothing.* Christ gave up the infinite riches of heaven to be born in a shed. Jesus models for us the fullest possible human life- and he wasn't rich. On a day-to-day level, he didn't have job security or a steady income. But he relied on his heavenly father, he relied on others. Until gethsemane, until Golgotha; that's where we see the full emptying.

If Jesus had given us anything less than all of himself, if he had held something back, then we could hold back from him. But we can't hold back from God, because he didn't hold back from us. As Jesus dies on the cross, he entirely empties himself of all comfort, of all intimacy with God, of all security- of everything of value. And who was he doing that for? If you're a Christian, you can say 'that was for me'. There is no price Jesus would not pay for you. You are that precious to him. But accepting that does something to you- it means that your response is to increasingly give of yourself to him. *'love so amazing, so divine, demands my life, my soul my all'*

If you're saying 'why should I give'? 'it's my money...' It may be that you haven't understood the Gospel, or at least it hasn't clicked into place for you.

If that is you, don't worry about money for a moment. Ask yourself- do I know, deep in my bones, that Jesus gave up everything for me?

Thirdly- and final point, the Gospel is freedom. The Gospel frees you from guilt, over anything and everything, including money. Guilt over money is a problem for some of us- we'll have had different backgrounds, different starting points in life. And then- You could always be more generous. You can always find someone who lives more sacrificially than you do. You can second-guess every purchase you make, you can always be more ethical in your shopping- the list goes on. But Jesus doesn't come to condemn, he comes to free. This isn't to absolve us from our financial responsibilities, but it is an assurance to us that in Christ, *grace wins over guilt*. And so might we pray about money and giving with light and forgiven hearts. Amen.