

Sunday 11th May 2025 The Grace of Giving

2 Kings 4v1-7 The Widow's Olive Oil

4 The wife of a man from the company of the prophets cried out to Elisha, "Your servant my husband is dead, and you know that he revered the Lord. But now his creditor is coming to take my two boys as his slaves."

2 Elisha replied to her, "How can I help you? Tell me, what do you have in your house?"

"Your servant has nothing there at all," she said, "except a small jar of olive oil."

3 Elisha said, "Go around and ask all your neighbors for empty jars. Don't ask for just a few. 4 Then go inside and shut the door behind you and your sons. Pour oil into all the jars, and as each is filled, put it to one side."

5 She left him and shut the door behind her and her sons. They brought the jars to her and she kept pouring. 6 When all the jars were full, she said to her son, "Bring me another one."

But he replied, "There is not a jar left." Then the oil stopped flowing.

7 She went and told the man of God, and he said, "Go, sell the oil and pay your debts. You and your sons can live on what is left."

2 Corinthians 9v6-15 Generosity Encouraged

6 Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. 7 Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. 8 And 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. 9 As it is written:

*"They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor;
their righteousness endures forever."^[a]*

10 Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. 11 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.

12 This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. 13 Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others 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. 14 And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you. 15 Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

We had a wonderful evening in here on Wednesday for the concluding ‘altogether’ session of our Practicing the Way course. Over 100 people of all ages and stages came together to study what it really means to live together in community. There was a palpable sense of the presence of the Lord, and I really felt moved to share a renewed sense of calling on this church to be a solid anchor point for the community and a trusted organisation with deep roots committed for the long haul. With our APCM coming up this evening I have been reflecting how 2024 was a year of building, and 2025 is a year of discipleship. But I also feel like God is nudging us to think differently over the next few years – but more about that this evening!

This morning is a bonus session of Practicing the Way before we start our new sermon series next week and I want to focus on one of the nine practices that John Mark Comer calls ‘the most joyful’ of them all. I am talking about Generosity or what the Apostle Paul calls the Grace of Giving.

Now in a couple of months I will have been here 3 years, and I don’t think I have actually ever preached on giving during that time. I have of course talked about church finances and prepared updates with our treasurer Rob to try to keep everyone informed of what is going on. But I don’t often preach on giving because even though I think it is an essential dimension of discipleship, I am conscious there is an inherent conflict of interest because I am paid by the Church of England, funded from our Parish Share.

That being said, I am a giver myself and I think it is important to talk about giving, because it is very much linked to joy and freedom as a disciple.

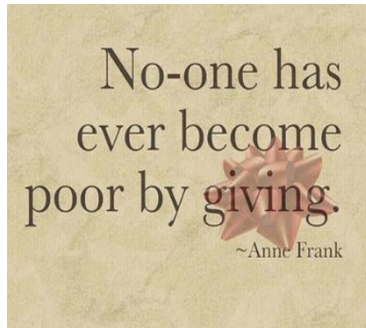
Listen to what John Mark Comer writes:

At the heart of the Trinitarian Community we call God is an outflow of generous, self-giving, forgiving love. In the gospel itself, “God so loved the world that he *gave* his one and only Son,” and the Son, in turn, *gave* the Spirit. When we give – our money, our resources, our time and love – we get to participate in that divine outflow of love. And “when you act like God, you get to feel like God. It comes as no surprise that sociologists are just now discovering the truth of what Jesus said two millennia ago: ‘it is happier to give than to receive.’

Sacrificial giving is a thread that runs the entire way through the pages of the Bible, and from the earliest chapters of Genesis right through to revelation, a freely generous heart is a character trait that God wants us to cultivate.

But we also have to recognise that giving to God can be emotionally challenging – and Bible history shows it has always been contentious. That the first murder in the Bible stemmed from Cains hard heart over giving. Instead of joyfully presenting his first fruits to God like Abel did, he held back and fostered resentment in his heart. The love of money, Paul wrote to Timothy, is the root of all sorts of evil.

Perhaps it is counter-intuitive but giving away a portion of our resources is part of the biblical recipe for wellbeing. If we simply try to acquire security by accumulating, we will end up dissatisfied and stressed. As Anne Frank concluded, No-one has ever become poor by giving.



But this is a life message we need to keep being reminded of.

The Charities Aid foundation produces an annual report called the *World Giving Index* which plots which countries are the most generous in terms of giving money, helping strangers and volunteering time, and interestingly the country with the highest percentage of people giving financially in 2024 was ... Indonesia. Their culture has regular festivals where everyone gives food away to people in the community.

Sadly The UK lags way behind in 22nd place, and the UK's generosity has seriously declined since the pandemic, with fewer people giving, volunteering or simply giving a helping hand. Fewer than 50% of Brits now give anything at all to charity or even sponsor someone for a charitable event.

So what does Jesus say about giving?

In the sermon on the mount, giving is listed alongside prayer and fasting as a key practice. Jesus assumed that giving should be a normal part of daily devotional life, but it should be done quietly and humbly:

Matthew 6:1-4 "Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. ... But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret."

The gospel writer Mark describes how Jesus watched those giving money at the temple and he saw past the amounts given to the attitude of the heart. The widow who gave two small copper coins was the one he commended because of her faithful sacrificial giving.

Mark 12:41-44 [The widow] put in two very small copper coins, worth only a few pennies. Jesus said, 'She, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on.'

Then Jesus taught the principle of giving and lending unconditionally and without calculating a return:

Luke 6:34-35 “If you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? ... But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back.”

And yet he also taught that you can't outgive God:

Luke 6:38 Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap.”

This echoes the story of the widow's jars miraculously being filled with olive oil in 2 Kings. As many jars as her sons could gather were filled by the grace of God, so she could pay off her debts and live in peace. We can certainly ask God to meet all our needs, but not necessarily all our wants. Phil 4v19 My God will meet all your *needs* according to his riches in Christ Jesus’.

Jesus' greatest warnings were about storing up treasures for ourselves on earth:

Matthew 6:21 “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also”... ²⁴“No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.

So for Jesus giving that God honours should be generous, faithful, unconditional and discrete.

There is some debate about whether *tithing* is a principle that should apply to Christians. Tithing was certainly mandatory for Israel as they would give a tenth of their livestock and produce as offerings at the temple to go to the Levites and priests who didn't have their own land. In the new covenant every Christian is now part of the Royal priesthood, so in that sense a mandatory tenth is no longer necessary.

That being said, The Apostle Paul gives specific instruction for the church – which in many ways is very simple: First we should give cheerfully and not under compulsion (2 Corinthians 9v7), regularly and proportionally to our income (1 Corinthians 16v1-2) but the proportion is for each of us to determine before the Lord. Our purpose should be

a) to support those in need (Luke 12:33-34)

32 “Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. 33 Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will never fail, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. 34 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

b) to support other Christians (Galatians 6:9-10)

⁹Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. ¹⁰Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

c) to support those in paid ministry (1 Timothy 5:17-18)

¹⁷The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honour, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. ¹⁸For Scripture says, “Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain,” and “The worker deserves his wages.”

So what proportion should we give?

That is between you and God. But in the absence of any other explicit guidance from the Lord then I suggest 10% of income is a well-established good starting point. Net/Gross, I will leave that up to you, and of course Gift Aid if you can.

But let me say this, as we have given to God, he has always met our needs. I will not preach the prosperity Gospel which teaches that if you sow £100 you will reap £1000. But I will say that if you give £100 you will be blessed with more than money. Sometimes it could even be financial. It has happened to me. But God is not an ATM. He is a Father who loves to bless us with every good and perfect gift.

Just one point for clarity – I am often asked ‘should I give if I am in debt?’ Well this is a matter for prayer but I guess for me it depends on whether the debt is secured or not. In other words, if you have a mortgage, that is a debt, but it is secured against the property. Most car loans are secured against the car. Student loans are secured against higher earnings potential. With these sorts of managed debt, I think it is still right to give. But it is definitely wrong to give if you are simply increasing unsecured debts like credit cards, payday loans or overdrafts. First clear these debts so that you can give from a place of security.

When Paul wrote ‘God loves a cheerful giver’ the word cheerful is ἡλάρος – hilaros from which we get the word hilarious!

This year we are going to have a gift day in October. It will be on the same Sunday as Harvest – October 12th . Let’s make it a hilarious harvest!