



The Round Church at
St Andrew the Great
Cambridge

A Sermon Preached
on Sunday 10th May 1998
by Mark Ashton

10p

1 Cor 16:1-4 and 2 Cor 8:10-9:5

A Christian's Possessions 3 – Ready to give

It won't have escaped your notice by now that it is our Gift Day today. For the last two weeks and today we are preaching through three sermons that are preparing us for this Gift Day. For the last two weeks we have been looking at **why** Christians give. First we studied the end of Matthew chapter 6, and Jesus' call to us to cut ourselves loose from the materialism of our age, and instead to invest in eternity. He's all for investment, but He urges us to invest wisely.

Last week we looked at the beginning of 2 Corinthians 8, and we saw that we give out of gratitude and not out of guilt—gratitude for grace. Only Christians can give like that because it is receiving God's mercy, His forgiveness for our sins, that releases generosity in our hearts. And I am primarily addressing what I say this morning to those who have received this grace. If you haven't, and you find what I'm saying puzzling, I hope it will nevertheless be interesting (if not intriguing) to you and that you will hang in there with us and watch what's going on even if you don't want to be a part of it.

It is God's mercy that releases generosity. And we saw last week that it is the generous whom God is looking for, not the wealthy. He doesn't do His work through the reluctant giving of the rich but legalistic. He does it through the generous giving of the grateful—be it a student on a grant, or a loan; be it a senior citizen on a pension; be it an unemployed person on benefit.

What a contrast with our world, which clings on to its own so desperately, and parts with it so grudgingly and with such bad grace!

One small boy was asked in an R.E. lesson to retell the story of Jesus answering that scribe's question about whether it was right to pay taxes to Caesar or not. You will remember that Jesus takes a coin and asks, "Whose image and superscription is this?" But in the small boy's version Jesus took the coin and said, "Whose mingy subscription is this?" That's the world's view of giving. And the Christian turns it upside down.

So the Bible is alarmingly blunt about money and giving. 'In your face', I think, would be the correct modern idiom. And if I find the Bible alarmingly 'in my face' blunt about giving, I guess that is because I am too coy about it. So I am going to try not to be coy this week. I'm going to try to be as frank as the Bible is, and that means this sermon will be very applied, more so than is usual here at St. Andrew the Great.

We are looking this week at **how** Christians give. The headings will show that we give proportionately, collectively, with scrupulous propriety, and we get organised in order to do so.

HOW Christians Give

1) We Give Proportionately

We will just glance back at 1 Corinthians 16, which provides the context for what Paul was writing about in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9. *Now about the collections for God's people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do. On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made. Then, when I arrive, I will give letters*

of introduction to the men you approve and send them with your gift to Jerusalem. If it seems advisable for me to go also, they will accompany me (1 Cor 16:1-4).

Look at verse 2: *On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made.* Christian giving is to be an ordered, systematic business, almost routine. And we are to give as we have been blessed: *in keeping with his income*—in proportion to what he/she has received.

The same idea is present in 2 Corinthians 8, verses 11 and 12: *Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means* [that's the same principle]. *For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have.* The Christian sets aside a proportion on a regular basis. Some have used the tenth, or the tithe, that the Jew gave as a rough measure. And a Gift Day like today is a moment to review that. What proportion of my money do I set aside for God? Perhaps some of us have never asked ourselves that question. Maybe it is time we did. Perhaps others of us need to check whether what we are giving now is still the same proportion of our income as it was when we first decided to give it.

Many people in the congregation are giving regularly by standing order (that is one reason why so many people, as you may have noticed, don't put anything in the bag during the collection, Sunday by Sunday, but just pass it along when it comes to them. It's not because they're too mean to give, but because they are giving in a more ordered way). The Gift Day is the occasion to bring that standing order before God and review whether it's appropriate or not.

Our giving should be proportionate to our regular income. But it should also reflect special blessing from God. It may be that there has been some special financial boon in the last twelve months—a legacy, a dividend, a house sale, a gift, a prize, a scholarship. Or the blessing may not be financial at all. God's people love to give Him thank offerings for all the blessings they have received at His hands. What has He done for us in the last twelve months? Has there been some special blessing? A

place at university, a degree, a job, a fiancé, a husband, a fiancée, a wife, a baby, a house, a Saviour? It is right to express our thanks for such things. And today is the day when we collectively look to do that—the moment for such a thank offering.

Beware pagan giving! (Forgive me for putting it in that way.) But the pagan gives in order to get something from God—hoping to earn a little merit from God by his or her gift. We must not give in that spirit. Christians give because of what we have already received, in gratitude for God's blessings upon us.

Stephen Olford tells the story of a Christian business man who was travelling in Korea. One day he saw in the field by the side of the road a young man pulling a rude plough, while an old man held the handles and pushed down from behind. The business man was rather amused and took a photograph of it and said to the missionary who was accompanying him, "That's a curious sight; I suppose these people are very poor". "Yes," the missionary said, "those two happen to be Christians. When their church was being built they were eager to give something towards it. They hadn't got any money so they decided to sell their one and only ox and give the proceeds to the church. This Spring they are pulling the plough themselves." The business man was silent for some moments, and then he said, "That must have been a real sacrifice." "They did not call it that," the missionary replied, "they rather thought that it was fortunate that they had an ox to sell."

When that business man got home he showed the photograph to his pastor and told him about it and said, "I want to double my giving and do some plough work." But that is not the point of the story. The point is that remark that they thought it was fortunate that they had an ox to sell. They looked back and gave because of what God had given to them.

We give proportionately, according to how He has blessed us.

2) We Give Collectively

We can't miss this point from the whole of chapters 8 and 9 (and the rest of the New Testament for that matter). The emphasis falls on Christians giving together. First the Corinthians,

then the Macedonians, have organised the collection together, so that together they can relieve the saints in Jerusalem. Paul keeps referring them to one another (in chapter 8 verses 1-4 he is getting the Corinthians to look at the Macedonians; in chapter 9 verse 2 he's talking about how he got the Macedonians to look at the Corinth-ians). We need each other's encouragement in this matter. We are to make up our own minds individually about how much we give (9:7), and we are to aim to give anonymously (not letting *your left hand know what your right hand is doing*), but we should channel our giving corporately. We make much more today of giving privately and individually than the Bible does. My own private gift to my special charity, or my pet missionary. That doesn't seem to be the normal New Testament pattern, where we are encouraged to participate in the fellowship of other believers in this matter as in all others. So we need to look for ways to encourage others by our giving, without bringing glory to ourselves. When we route our givings through the fellowship, through the church, others get encouraged by the amount we manage to give together. When I consider my personal contribution to this Gift Day, I am not particularly encouraged. I think, *how will we achieve a really significant sum?* But I think I will be very encouraged indeed by the total that we all give together this Gift Day.

Paul teaches us that our individual giving can edify the whole body of Christ (you will see that in 9:12-15, when we finish off this passage in tonight's service), it can build us all up, as we give together.

We give proportionately, we give collectively.

3) We Give with Scrupulous Propriety

Verses 16 to 24 of chapter 8 really amount to a letter of commendation to the Corinthians of Titus (vv 16, 17), whom they already knew, and of two anonymous brothers: *We are sending along with him the brother who is praised by all the churches for his service to the gospel* (v 18), and another one in verse 22: *In addition we are sending with them our brother who has often proved to us in many ways that he is zealous, and now even more so because of his great confidence in you.* Paul stresses the credentials of these three men (these three collectors of the collection) as Christian workers and as representatives of the churches: *As*

for Titus, he is my partner and fellow-worker among you; as for our brothers, they are representatives of the churches and an honour to Christ. They were not chosen by Paul. They're not his buddies. They are the representatives of the churches; because Paul wants to guard against any possible accusations or malpractice. Verses 20 and 21 really give the gist of what he's on about here: *We want to avoid any criticism of the way we administer this liberal gift. For we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord, but also in the eyes of men.* Paul knew that it is before God that we will be judged.

Billy Graham tells a delightful story against himself when the collection plate was being passed around at the end of a service. As it came to him he fished in his pocket and got out a note and put it in, and as he did so he realised that he'd put in a \$20 dollar bill when he meant to put in a \$10 dollar bill. So he tried to reach the plate to correct his mistake. His wife, beside him, said, "What are you doing, Billy?" He said, "Well, I put a \$20 note in and I meant to put only a \$10 note in." Ruth said, "Don't worry! God knows you only intended to put a \$10 note in!"

But Paul knew that the Christian handling of money must be transparently honest and above reproach in the eyes of men also. Do you see it there in those verses? *We want to avoid any criticism of the way we administer this liberal gift. For we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord, but also in the eyes of men.* When he eventually journeyed to Jerusalem, we gather from Acts 20:4 that he had at least seven representatives of the churches with him—to make sure that the money that those churches had given was not misused in any way. (Of course, this was before the days of Securicor, so he probably picked the rugby blues to come with him).

We are to be scrupulous in this matter. That's why, in this church, we try to keep the handling of the church's finances and decisions about donations as far away from the paid staff of the church as possible. We have two groups (The Overseas Mission Group and The U.K. Mission Group) that take the decisions about where the church will give money on behalf of all of us. We were rightly rebuked at our annual meeting for not having the accounts available as long before that meeting as we should have done. We must be scrupulous in

these matters.

The lay leadership of the church works to keep me away from the running of the church's finances—and quite rightly so. I like to think that is to free me for Bible teaching. But, of course, it's actually to protect the finances!—and to maintain scrupulous propriety. (Many years ago when the PCC decided to move here from the Round Church building it was said that they would abort the project if I, as the vicar, got involved in it. And I thought that too was an encouraging gesture to support my Bible ministry. It only gradually dawned on me that it was also to protect the project from my incompetence!)

Christian giving is to be proportionate, it is to be collective, it is to be scrupulously honest. And if that is how our giving is to be then we must get organised.

4) We must get Organised

Chapter 9, verses 1 to 5, can sound as though Paul is indulging in a little emotional manipulation: trying to get the Corinthians and the Macedonians almost to compete with each other in generosity. But we must take his words at face value and read them in the context of what he's just said in 8:10 & 11: *And here is my advice about what is best for you in this matter: Last year you were the first not only to give but also to have the desire to do so. Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means.* And then in chapter 9: *There is no need for me to write to you about this service to the saints. 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. But I am sending the brothers in order that our boasting about you in this matter should not prove hollow, but that you may be ready, as I said you would be. For if any Macedonians come with me and find you unprepared, we—not to say anything about you—would be ashamed of having been so confident. So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to visit you in advance and finish the arrangements for the generous gift you had promised. Then it will be ready as a generous gift, not as one grudgingly given (9:1-5).*

The Corinthians were enthusiasts. They were the first to start collecting for the poor saints in Jerusalem. Their zeal had got the others going. But they were disorganised (we know that from Paul's first letter to them. We know that was the sort of church they were: zealous but disorderly.) The Macedonians, on the other hand, were perseverers. They were finishers, while the Corinthians were starters. Don't we know those sorts of people in life—those who start projects and those who finish them? And we both need each other. The Macedonians needed the Corinthian zeal (taking on this new ambitious giving project) to get them started. But the Corinthians needed the Macedonian perseverance to get them organised to get it finished.

The point Paul is making in verses 4 and 5 of chapter 9 is that the Corinthian collection cannot look generous if it doesn't exist when the Macedonians arrive. It will have to be scraped together in a hurry and it will look grudging. Look again at verse 5: *So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to visit you in advance and finish the arrangements for the generous gift you had promised. Then it will be ready as a generous gift, not as one grudgingly given.*

He genuinely is not doubting their generosity. He doubts their organisation: their ability to complete their arrangements. So he says to the Corinthian church, "Get organised!" Plan it out and execute it efficiently. You see, we need to employ our hearts and our heads in Christian giving. I said last week that the Macedonians were insanely generous. But Christian generosity is also to be harnessed by wisdom.

We in the U. K. today are very blessed that our government wants to encourage charitable giving, and it makes tax provisions to assist it. We should exploit them to the full. That's why they exist. We're not cheating, but doing exactly what the government intends us to do.

There may be students here who will be in employment in a few months who could make a commitment now but not pay anything yet. Pay when you're in a position to give in a tax-efficient way. Use the head as well as the heart in Christian giving. Others of us may need time to ponder how we can best do this. We may need to take advice.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)

Please don't hesitate to call back anything you gave earlier in this service if you want a little longer to reflect on it, to bring it before God, so that head and heart are right in the matter.

We call this a Gift Day, but it's usually more like a Gift Month. It takes quite a long time. Please take your time. Spontaneity may be much less spiritual than thought and prayer and planning—the heart and the head.

We give **proportionately**; we give **collectively together**; we give **in the highest standards of honesty**; and we give **in an organised and thought-out way**—completing what we first promise.

I said this would be practical and applied, and you may not be too pleased with this morning's sermon. I'm sorry if these thoughts are alien to you, as I warned at the beginning. I think they will be to some at the moment. Christians are right out of line with our culture in this matter. You may even feel that it is quite out of order for me to have spoken in the way I have today.

But I hope that you will not fail to notice what lies below our attitude to money. You see, this is not actually about achieving some financial target this Gift Day. It's about the relationship between each of us and God.

In his book *The Royal Route to Heaven* Alan Redpath quotes this story: 'A certain Christian once said to a friend, "Our church costs too much. They are always asking for money." Her friend replied in this fashion: "Some time ago a little boy was born in our home. He cost us a lot of money from the very beginning: he had a big appetite, he needed clothes, medicine, toys and even a puppy. Then he went to school, and that cost a lot more; later he went on to college, then he began dating, and that cost a small fortune! But in his last year at college he died, and since the funeral he hasn't cost a penny. Now which situation do you think we would rather have?" After a significant pause the friend continued, "As long as this church lives it will cost. When it dies, it won't cost us anything. A living church has the most vital message for all the world today, therefore I am going to give and pray with everything I have to help to keep our church a living church.' '