

1 Tim 6:6-19

It is said, sometimes, that vicars talk too much about money.

This is especially the case, you might think, when we have just completed a Stonework appeal and people have, once again, responded with astonishing generosity. We raised 30k when we hoped to raise 25. You might reasonably feel that other than saying thank you, a period of silence on this topic might be in order.

In which case I advise you once again that the emergency exits are situated to the rear on both sides of the church building. For this is a sermon about money.

In my defence, however, two things:

Number one, I challenge anyone to look at today's readings and find something else obvious to preach about.

Number two, this is *not* a sermon about giving the church money. The Church does need your money, you should give it, and I will preach about that on other mornings. But even if the Church was swimming in cash, I would still be preaching about money and generosity. Because there are two other things that cannot be said often enough. Number one, you should give more to the poor than you do to the church. Number two, giving is not just about what other people need: it's about your spiritual health, about how *you* stand in relation to God.

Number one: give more to the poor than to the Church. Of course, you should give to the church. That is important. But giving to the poor is *more* important. True religion is this, says St. James: care for the widow and orphan. Or take the prophet Amos, and how he says God views religion which doesn't prioritize the poor. Words from just before what we read today: 'I hate, I despise your festivals. I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you bring me your burnt offerings and your grain offerings – your membership of the Parish Giving Scheme, your gift to the Stonework Appeal – I will not accept them. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice flow down like waters, and righteousness like a never-failing stream.'

So it's simple: whatever you give to the church, give more to the poor. That might be some particular individual you know in need; that might be a direct debit to charity – but however you do it, do it.

And then that point about giving being for your own spiritual health. This comes down to the fundamental reason we're meant to give. The Bible says that we are made in the image and the likeness of God. The image and likeness of God. Now, that doesn't mean that God looks like an old man a long white beard: no, it's talking about how God is and what he does. And what the whole long biblical story is working out is that ultimately, God is the One who gives – who gives everything, who pours Himself out on a Cross so that others might live. God is the One who gives everything away. So when we give, our time, our love, our money, ourselves – we're echoing the nature of God. We're in touch with what we're meant to be, doing what we were made for.

You'll notice that I snuck in there time, love, service – all we give apart from money. And all these other ways are so valuable, so important. However, there's no avoiding the fact that the Bible's attention is relentlessly on money. It's constantly pushing us, as if to say: yes, it is great – really great – that you volunteer, that you give time, that you pray. Really well done ... but where's the money? Jesus said, 'where your treasure is, there is your heart.' Where your *treasure* is – and he wasn't speaking metaphorically. Money is the thing that most people find really, really hard to give – harder even than their time and talents. We find all sorts of reasons for not giving it. And some of those reasons are good ones. But many of them, if we're honest, are excuses. People who say they can't afford to give £50 a month to the poor, but can take foreign holidays every year, are lying. And if you say you can't give £20 a month to the poor, but go to a coffee shop twice a week – you don't mean can't; you mean won't. Money makes us tell lies, one of the reasons Paul calls it the root of all kinds of evil.

One lie we collectively tell ourselves is that we Brits are a really generous people. We're not. Yes, big one-off appeals – for Children in Need, or a natural disaster that really catches public attention – do well. We're good at giving spontaneously and occasionally. But nationally, we are pretty rubbish at what you might call *boring* giving – month in, month out, steady committed giving, maybe only of small amounts but adding up over the years, the kind of giving which is more like loving: undramatic, routine, committed. Nationally only 29% of adults give like that, to any charity, with a monthly or weekly commitment – however small. Even when you factor in those who are genuinely too poor to give, and those who don't give to charity but do so directly to those in need, even then 29% is scandalously low. As a people, most of us are just far too much in love with our money.

Well, being a Christian involves falling steadily *out* of love with money. This is one of the chief ways in which we are to be distinctive from the world around us. So how do we do it? How do we purge ourselves of humanity's collective greed?

Well, the first element of the answer is, as always, prayer – simply getting closer to Jesus. Think of Him as the great Generosity of God, the great divine giving away so that others might live. Think of what kind of self-emptying the Cross means. Dwell on it, absorb it, let it become the controlling reality of your imagination and heart. Tell yourself, this is what being human means. This is the image of God, this is what I'm called to. And as you do that, over time, what's outside of you – Jesus' example – comes to be inside you, working itself out in you. That's what we mean by the gift of the Holy Spirit: through prayer, God will change you to become more like Jesus.

And you help that happen by beginning to act as if it has – in other words, in this matter of money, by just starting to give. By making that as routine and steady a part of your life as breathing. Don't let anyone tell you, incidentally, how much you should give – no-one but you knows precisely what your responsibilities are, and everybody's situation is different, and changes from one year to the next – so if someone comes to you and says 'give 10%', or whatever, ignore them. Nobody can tell you what to give.

There is some good advice though about *how* to give. Try asking these questions:

Number 1: is my giving regular? Is it month in, month out? Or is it just when I remember, when I feel like it? And change it, so that it is steady, regular. Whoever you're helping needs that: they need you to be dependable, not flitting in and out. It is a kind of love, and as with all love, you don't just do it now and again: it is a settled and steady thing.

Number 2: is it generous? And this isn't a matter of the absolute figure, whether that be £10 a month or £1000. Imagine instead that at the end of the year, you suddenly got all that giving back. Would that be brilliant? Would it make a real difference to your finances? Or frankly, would it be no big deal? If it is no big deal ... well, frankly, that's a sign you're not giving enough.

Number 3: is it reviewed? Because if you decided, say, twenty years ago to give twenty pounds every month, and have never changed it since, today because of inflation that gift is actually worth about thirteen pounds less. You are much less generous than you think, because the value of money has changed. And your circumstances change too, for better or worse. What was right for you to give last year might not be this year. You need to look closely at your giving every year, and think carefully about whether it is still right. And the assumption should be that as you grow as a Christian, you grow more generous. Sometimes there will be good reasons why that's not possible, but the direction of travel should be clear. Where your treasure is, there's your heart.

Number 4: every so often, is it radical and spectacular? Most of loving someone is mundane, practical, regular – but it would be odd if every so often, it wasn't more dramatic and explosive than that, if there weren't real stand-out moments of passion. And so it is giving. £10 a week, every week, is steady, serious, committed giving – but every so often, should it not be £30? £50? A hundred? You can't give like that all the time, of course not – but every so often. To remember the quite astonishing generosity of God from which it all springs.

Regular, reviewed, generous, occasionally radical. To the poor first, and then to the church.

That's what our giving should look like. This week, look at yours and see if it does.