

St Paul's theology of giving – applied to today

It's never been easy to talk about money in churches. Even St Paul, writing in 2 Corinthians 8 & 9, clearly feels he's doing the first century equivalent of tiptoeing through a minefield. The background: Judaea had been hit by severe famine and Christians there were in dire need; a collection was being raised from the Gentile churches to bring them relief. In encouraging the Corinthians to play their part, Paul sets out key principles of Christian giving.

Normally, if we really want to understand something, we start at the beginning. To understand Paul's teaching on giving, we need to start at the end. 2 Cor. 9.15: *Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift* (he intends "indescribable" to be a positive statement!).

The gift of God, of which Paul writes, is nothing less than Jesus Christ, and the life, the love, the salvation, the forgiveness, his teaching, his promises – everything that flows from his incarnation, death and resurrection. For all this, says Paul, "thanks be to God".

Everything else Paul teaches about giving has to be understood in that context. It begins with gratitude. **We're to give with gratitude for what God has first given us.** Gratitude is the primary motivation for Christian giving, and when we give to God, it's in response to all that God has already given us. There's an echo of this truth in this Eucharist, when we say "all things come from you; and of your own do we give you."

Next, Paul sees **giving as an opportunity, not an obligation.** For Paul, this is such a central point that he repeats it. Perhaps he knew enough about human nature to realize that the one sure way to stop people giving is to twist their arms and tell them they ought: 'ought' has a nasty habit of stifling genuine motivation.

Of course, in a parish context giving doesn't always feel like 'opportunity'. That may be because the largest item in our expenditure is the Parish Share (informally still referred to as "the quota"). That's the sum we hand over to the Diocese annually, which covers the costs and housing of stipendiary clergy, the training and resourcing of ordained and lay ministers, and the sector ministries provided by the diocese from which we have benefitted greatly in recent years. This year our Parish Share is £79,605, over 50% of our total expenditure.

Paul goes on to teach that **giving is a matter of personal decision.** "Each person should give as he has decided for himself". Paul refuses to lay down strict guidelines. He doesn't say "you should give £X or Y% of your income". Paul knows that circumstances vary; which is why he writes: "If the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has — not according to what one does not have". God knows we can't give what we don't have.

So rather than be prescriptive, Paul is descriptive; and then he leaves it to us and to our conscience to work out for ourselves our level of giving.

This approach is not a cop-out. Giving according to our means is never an excuse to give less than we might. Rather, Paul's teaching on giving challenges us to review our finances, to review our life-style, and to consider how what we give to God fits into the total picture.

In other words, giving to God is not something that we calculate once we've worked out all our financial commitments. As Christians, **giving to God is one of our financial commitments**, and needs to be considered at the same time as all the rest.

Paul is also passionately concerned about **the spirit in which we give**: "Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly, or under compulsion". Paul is desperate to avoid arm-twisting, negativity, or emotional blackmail. None of us responds positively to a sense of compulsion; that's the danger for the one making the appeal. But nor does Paul want anyone to give reluctantly; that's the danger for the giver.

Reluctance introduces a grudging element into the equation; and whenever we give grudgingly we miss out on the joy of the giving, about which Paul writes so movingly. Any project which depends on reluctant giving is likely to be seriously undermined from the outset. On the other hand, giving generously to God because we're grateful for his sustained and unmerited generosity to us not only provides the financial resources to support his ministry and mission: it also renews us as people.

That's, in part, what Paul means in v.7: "The one who sows sparingly will reap sparingly; and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully". It's not just that if we sow bountifully through our giving, there will be a rich harvest for God's work here in the parish and beyond (though there will!). Paul is also saying that we benefit too: "You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us".

Paul is not promising that we shall all be rich. What he does say is that we shall be rich enough to be able to be generous. Indeed, alongside Paul's encouragement to us to give with gratitude, willingly, as we are able, he also teaches that "it is in God's power to provide you with all good gifts in abundance, so that, *with every need always met to the full* (my italics), you may have something to spare for every good cause."

Thank you for giving the time to read these reflections on Paul's theology of giving. I want to close by letting his words speak for themselves again:

"The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work ... You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us ... Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!" (from 2 Corinthians 9)

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