

# THE JOY OF GIVING

By Murray Smith

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## Giving---Joy or duty?

For the second time in the service the offering bags were on their way around, as was the custom week by week. You could feel a slight squirming lack of ease as they cut a relentless swathe through the rows.

Regardless of whether the cause that the money was being collected for had merit or validity, it was obvious that some people were not brimming over with joyful responsiveness to the prompting to 'dig deep' yet again.

Why not? After all, they were giving to God, weren't they and opening up the windows of heaven over their lives? Some no doubt found it was something they could do freely and joyfully. For others it was an exercise done out of a sense of loyalty or obligation, while others did it out of sheer compulsion or from the nagging sense of guilt they felt if they abstained.



Fear was there too. Fear that somehow you could earn God's disapproval by holding back, and that His best blessings eluded those who did not pay their dues with abandoned, unquestioned giving — even if it was beyond their real means. Like the family who gave to the point where they had to go and avail themselves of another local church's food-bank just to get by.

In another setting, the shame of not having your family's name recorded amongst others that were publicized as having made a financial sacrifice for the purchase of a new church organ propelled many to the brink of personal hardship.

A good dose of Biblical balance and sanity seems to be lacking in many parts of the Church in presenting ‘giving’ as one aspect of the whole council of God. One perception the world commonly has of the Church is that it is a bottomless pit, constantly bleating for money. Perhaps it’s a perception that has in many cases been justified.

Prior to the Reformation the selling of indulgences was an atrocious form of extorting massive amounts of money from people so that plans for church building projects and other personal agendas of the hierarchy could be realised. You could be forgiven for wondering if it is any different in some places today, as well meaning leaders exhort people to give money in exchange for the benefits and rewards it will earn the giver.

**Giving — *Just a means to an end?***

The fact is that the Bible is full of encouragement to be a ‘giver’ along with spelling out straightforward benefits for being ‘big hearted’ and ‘open handed’.

“One man gives freely, yet gains even more; another withholds unduly but comes to poverty. A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed.” ***Proverbs 11:24***

There is a sense that in giving, we are sowing seed and that it can be assumed that the seed will bring a return. Jesus said:

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



A farmer who looked for a crop to harvest without having sown something first would have little basis for such optimism. Paul encouraged the Corinthian church that to sow sparingly would result in one reaping sparingly.

“Remember this; whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.”  
*2 Corinthians 9.6*

The problem is that these verses and others in a similar vein are often used to manipulate and cajole people into giving. It is even presented as a formula to achieve material blessing. Unfortunately, in these circles, the act of giving is promoted more as a principal to be adopted, rather than primarily a response of personal gratitude to a generous God. When you put the discipline ahead of devotion it can become mechanical — something to be dutifully maintained. Yes, giving can be a means of grace for our lives, whereby we open the door to in turn receive — but it is not just a ‘paint by numbers’ technique.

Some of the extreme ‘prosperity’ teaching to many seems to be just too slick. It has distorted what the Bible says by encouraging well intentioned people to ‘cast their bread upon the water’ and watch it come back soon-- multiplied many times over-- as a sure fire thing. Much like an investment policy or term deposit. Without a doubt God has shown us in His Word that it is His purpose to bless us with everything we need, and to enable us to in turn be a blessing.

Insufficiency in the lives of God’s people does little to glorify Him as our provider. But it’s not like we have access to a sort of scheme where, if you put in a certain amount, you are guaranteed to get it all back with a healthy dividend as well! Much harm has been done by legalistic mandates promoting this type of scenario, which appeals to ‘self interest’ as a motivation to give. Nowhere do the Scriptures condone giving to the point of incurring great hardship and being



incapable of meeting basic personal responsibilities such as providing for one's own.

The Corinthians were learning to be givers and Paul states in the context of encouraging them to prepare themselves for presenting an offering that they “gave *themselves* first to the Lord”.

***2 Corinthians 8:8***

In giving, whether it is our finances, or our time, goods, abilities, or whatever, we present our offering as an extension of having first offered *ourselves* to the Lord. Giving everything we *are* to God will translate into us displaying a willingness to hold everything we own ‘lightly’, as stewards entrusted with the care of someone else’s property. It’s not that God needs us to give Him anything. Psalm 24:1- 2 tells us that ‘everything belongs to God’. The earth is His, and everything in it. He doesn’t need anything from us to enhance His position.

**When worship dries up, so too will ‘giving’.**

The act of giving is a statement. Giving reminds us of the source of our provision. It is saying that every good thing we have came from God who gave us the ability to produce income and resources in the first place.

“But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth”. ***Deut 8:18***

Giving acknowledges past provision and expresses trust for future supply. It helps us stay in a posture of dependence before the Lord lest we should we ever get puffed up with our own sense of resourcefulness, and imagine we can do it ourselves.

As an expression of worship, giving tests our attitude and reveals in some measure, our devotion and reliance upon the Lord. It’s a bit like prayer. If we don’t feel the need to pray, chances are we don’t feel a sense of reliance upon God. One thing that becomes apparent

is that when worship dries up, so too does the level of willingness to give — whether it be giving of material substance or any other form of giving.

The amount we give is apparently inconsequential to God, (I suspect too that the ‘how’ and ‘where’ of our giving is less important than some legalists would suggest.) What is important is the ‘heart’ that’s behind any offering, as seen by Jesus’ comments as he observed the pretentious, flamboyant, very public giving of those who were financially well off.

By contrast, a poor widow who came gave a very insignificant amount, yet Jesus said she had given the most! She earned Jesus’ commendation not because of the monetary value of her gift but because of what her gift represented and the heart attitude behind it.  
*Mark 1:; 4 1-44*

In today’s church culture with all its equipment to make things ‘happen’, rich with music and great talent, our concept of worship risks being reduced to merely being those corporate times of singing assisted by an able band and worship leader. How easy it is to get carried along by this kind of group momentum. Have you ever upon reflection, discovered that your mind was somewhere else and that at times you got a bit distracted and were merely singing the words at the behest of someone up the front’? ‘Drawing near with our mouth but not with our heart is a pretty normal human experience for all of us on the odd occasion if we were honest! Perhaps our giving too, can likewise be embarked upon in a somewhat similar mindless manner at the behest of someone up the front’?

If we were to consciously treat all our giving and offerings, (regardless of whether the context was in a corporate setting or not) as an act of worship unto the Lord, such mind disengaging lapses might be less likely. If giving becomes thoughtfully and prayerfully considered, it can be directed and used by God in the most amazing ways—even to meet needs that have never been aired before anyone else save being whispered to the Lord Himself.

In the Old Testament there are numerous references to the connection between worship and *giving substance* to God. It always entails reserving the best for God. Bringing Him the ‘first fruits’ was honouring God for His goodness and provision. The idea was not paying a ‘spiritual tax’ or making a token gesture, but respectfully acknowledging that God deserved first consideration, not the leftovers of our substance.

The sacrificial lamb that was offered was not some old flyblown diseased thing on its last legs that would not make it anyway. It had to be the best for God. This is a thought-provoking filter by which to judge our own giving to God. A balancing thought in all this is ‘God is not ‘unreasonable’ and doesn’t expect us to give beyond what we have or are able to afford, unless he puts a specific ‘faith’ challenge on our hearts.



It’s a matter of *willingly* giving what is appropriate in our personal situation; with the level of faith we have, not with the level of faith someone else has. “For if a willingness is there the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have”.

***2 Corinthians 8:12***

### **Our practices display our priorities**

In an ever increasingly trend conscious and materialistic age, giving is an action that directly opposes the tendency or the desire we can drift into of accumulating more and better ‘stuff. Marketing is designed to create a sense of need and ‘aspiration’ and more than ever before, we need sales resistance and discernment to avoid being swept along by the spirit of the age.

The potential that the unsatisfied acquisition of material things has to put a stranglehold upon our lives is a frequent warning on the lips of Jesus. The cares of this life and the deceitfulness of riches blind us to eternal perspectives and choke the work of God in our lives.

Why did Jesus say that it was hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God? Some might take this statement and adopt a rigid stance that rich people and God are somehow incompatible. That's not the case at all. Jesus numbered amongst his diverse range of associates some very wealthy folk, some of whom no doubt ministered practically to the material needs that he and his disciples experienced at times.

Actually the average New Zealander is among the world's major wealth owners and could be considered very rich when contrasted with how most of the world's population lives. The way that wealth and resources are distributed amongst the peoples of the earth means that just to own a car, would place you in the world's top five percent of wealth owners. The fact is, that it comes down to a question of focus. Apparently there are not too many people who can handle the responsibility of worldly wealth without it diverting or at least dissipating them in the pursuit of true spiritual riches. A wealthy businessperson died a while ago leaving a large estate. It was unclear whether his salvation was secured by personal faith in Christ. At the funeral a verse was read that gently sent a sobering call to the colleagues and family this person left behind.

“What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world but loses his own soul.” **Mark 8: 36**

The picture Jesus gave of a rich man and his camel loaded up with goods could not be more graphic...



“Verily I say unto you that a rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven. It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God”. **Matthew.19: 23-24**

It is recorded that this saying astonished those hearing it spoken at the time. Not only them either! It has continued to mystify subsequent hearers through the ages.

The reference is to the Needle Gate in a section of Jerusalem's city wall. It was very narrow hence 'the eye of the needle' but it was wide enough to allow a merchant through with his camel if he was arriving late when other main entries were locked. Providing the merchant first stripped the camel of the goods that he was carrying, they could both enter but it was impossible to enter fully laden with goods.

The merchant would strip his camel down, then lead the beast inside and have to bring his merchandise through by hand.

The illustration could not be more vivid. Unless there is a heart preparedness to 'lay down our goods' it is not possible to enter God's kingdom. This is not necessarily a universal mandate for all believers to divest themselves of every possession and to embrace a life of abject poverty. It is speaking more about how dearly we 'hold' things. Do we 'hold' things, or do things 'hold' us?

Throughout the New Testament there is a high level of encouragement to give compassionately, thoughtfully and generously. For this to happen, there obviously first has to be an inflow of supply.

Paul states that God will supply our needs (seed to sow, bread to eat) enabling us to be cheerfully generous. **2 Corinthians 9: 7-11**

The term tithing (giving 10% of one's income) never appears in the New Testament, and thus some would say the requirement was abolished. The insistent claim that the tithe must be brought into the "storehouse" (the local church where you are 'fed') in order to experience God's full blessing, does not necessarily stack up to being the only Biblical way to structure or regulate one's giving in a New Testament context. It could however be considered as a guideline or benchmark.

There's a range of viewpoints on this. The thought that "offerings" should be considered optional at the discretion of a believer and ought to be given over and above the tithe, which is mandatory and non-optional, has been promoted and unquestioningly accepted in many parts of the church. Where it is enforced in a rigid legalistic manner, it argues against the whole spirit of what is conveyed in the scriptures.

Individual believers who love the Lord and want to do the right thing will find themselves with a sense of responsibility to endeavour to be led by the Lord in their giving, and to seek opportunity to do so in a spirit of generosity.

Giving this way leads to joy that won't become drudgery.  
Muray Smith.

