

Pray

Reading

We've seen these past two weeks what Paul thinks about the financial support he's received. He says: I'm very glad of the support, but not because I need it to be happy. I can be content whether I have much or little. Yet, he says...

14 Yet it WAS kind of you to share my trouble. 15 And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only. 16 Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again. 17 Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit. 18 *I* have received full payment, and more. I am *well* supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God.
(Philippians 4:14–18)

These are the words of God.

Intro

If you were to make a list of subjects that people least want to hear a sermon about, I reckon “financial giving” would be right up there.

For the preacher, it’s a minefield. I realise, for example, there may be those here who are visiting this church for the first time, or who are visiting any CHURCH for the first time, and the danger is that any talk about GIVING may sound like a confirmation of your worst suspicions - that churches are basically just there to line their own pockets. We think of tv evangelists with private jets and huge beachside properties, constantly telling their much poorer congregation to give more and more of their limited income.

I suspect also that many of us think that talking about money is rather crass and unspiritual. Not a fitting subject in a house of worship.

And yet, as you probably know, the subject of giving is conspicuous in the Bible. There is more written in the New Testament on the subject of giving, than there is written on the subject of heaven and hell combined. 15% of everything Jesus said was on this topic of giving and generosity. So apparently this really matters.

And I think that’s because what we do with our money reveals, like nothing else, what we REALLY believe.

In the film All the President’s Men, where Dustin Hoffman and Robert Redford are trying to uncover government corruption, their mantra is: “Follow the money”. That’s true here.

If you want to know what a person is REALLY serious about, follow the money. Reading my calendar might tell you something about what matters to me. Listening to things I say in the pulpit might do that too. But if you got hold of my bank statements, that would be much more revealing.

How we spend money shows what we ACTUALLY believe.

When John the Baptist is asked in Luke’s Gospel, by three different groups of people, how they could prove that their repentance was sincere, he gave three answers:

He said they should share clothes and food with the poor.

He said tax collectors shouldn’t take extra money from people.

He said soldiers should be content with their wages and shouldn’t extort money.

So, how can I know that I've really been converted? John says, follow the money.

So if someone says: how do I know if my faith is REAL? Or perhaps if you're wondering yourself, how do *I* really know if I'm saved?

Ask the question: how am I treating money and material possessions? Do they pass through my hands easily, or do my hands make a fist, to try and keep hold of them?

In the days of the early Christians, it was their giving, their charity to others, that most impressed the non-Christians around them. The 3rd century philosopher Porphyry, who was a prominent critic of Christianity, wrote this:

How apparent to everyone it is, and how shameful, that our own people lack of support from us, when no Jew ever has to beg, and the impious Galileans support not only their OWN poor, but OURS as well.

The generosity of Christians was unique, and widely remarked upon.

This passage in Philippians helps to explain why. Paul gives us three motivations to give, here in chapter 4.

Firstly, be motivated by contentment.

Secondly, be motivated by koinonia.

Thirdly, be motivated by credit.

Apart from Philippians, one book in particular has been a big influence as I've reflected on this passage. So I want to acknowledge that, and recommend it: Randy Alcorn's book, *The Treasure Principle*. It is excellent.

So firstly, the Apostle Paul implies we should be motivated by contentment.

1 Be motivated by contentment

Think about the flow of Philippians chapter 4. First Paul talks in verses 11-13 about contentment (you remember he says “I have learned in whatever situation... to be content), and THEN in verse 14, he immediately begins to talk about giving.

The logical connection is this: the more contentment we experience in Christ, the less we feel we need material things to be content. So our grip on money loosens. We realise we don't need those things to be happy, so we're happy to give them away to others. Contentment leads to giving.

In Exodus 36, when the Tabernacle was being built, people were so excited about it, that the text says they had to be “restrained” from giving more. Their giving was just an irrepressible overflow of their joy that the Lord's house was being built. So contentment leads to giving.

BUT ALSO, it works the other way round: giving LEADS to contentment!

In one journal I read this week, it said:

“...neuroscientists have discovered that acts of charity give humans pleasure, activating two parts of the brain: the ventral tegmental area in the midbrain that gets satisfaction from sex, drugs, and food, and the subgenual area of the brain, which is stimulated in response to cute babies and romantic partners.”

So that's a pretty potent cocktail.

“Research has also proven that having a generous attitude greatly improves one's immune system, extends a person's lifespan, and acts as an antidote to pain.”

In other words, giving LEADS to contentment, which of course leads to more giving, which leads to more contentment.

There's a remarkable passage in Second Corinthians chapter 8 which gives us the background to the Philippians' generosity.

8 We want you to know [says Paul] about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia [that's where Philippi was], 2 for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. 3 For they gave

according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, 4 begging us earnestly for the FAVOR [the GRACE] of taking part in the relief of the saints —
(2 Corinthians 8:1–4)

So they gave out of the overflow of the joy they had in Christ. And they begged Paul for the privilege of giving more, because they knew it would lead to MORE joy. Poverty-stricken people BEGGING - not begging for money, but begging to be able to GIVE money to the work of the gospel.

You can see how that would have impressed the non-Christians around them: If those in poverty gave away what would seem to be their most precious commodity, it must be because in giving, they were receiving something much MORE precious to them than money.

Interesting that Paul says they gave out of their abundance of joy AND their extreme poverty. There does seem to be something about having LESS that encourages us to give more, proportionately speaking. And there's something about having MORE that tends to make us give less. Perhaps that's why 85 percent of Americans donate less than 2 percent of their income to charity.

The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer gave one suggestion as to why. He talked about the "thralldom of material things." Thralldom - meaning we're held captive by material things.

Randy Alcorn, who incidentally has given away all his book royalties, puts it like this:

Giving brings freedom. It's a matter of physics. The greater the mass, the greater the hold that mass exerts. The more things we own - the greater their total mass - the more they pull us into orbit around them. Finally, like a black hole, they suck us in.

You know, if we find ourselves struggling to be generous with our money, we don't actually control our money. Our money is controlling us.

And so, when we give it away, we feel an exhilarating sense of joy and freedom.

The missionary Hudson Taylor said: "The less I spent on myself and the more I gave away, the fuller of happiness and blessing did my soul become."

Another reason that giving makes us happy is because giving is God-like. Giving is the very heart of God and his gospel.

After all, what IS the gospel?

The gospel is this: "God so loved the world that he GAVE". Overwhelming generosity is the beating heart of God. He freely gives - to all those who are spiritually bankrupt - the immeasurable RICHES of Christ. Jesus says, repent and believe in me, and all I have, all I am, is YOURS."

Paul says:

9 ...you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by HIS poverty might become RICH.
(2 Corinthians 8:9)

When you give generously from the overflow of your joy and contentment, you are doing the very thing that God Himself loves to do. You are becoming, by the very act of generous giving, more like Christ Himself.

So that's our first motivation to give. We're motivated to give - both by our contentment in Christ, and our desire to get even MORE contentment in Christ.

Secondly...

2 Be motivated by koinonia.

Verse 14:

14 ...it was kind of you to SHARE my trouble. 15 And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia [he means “after I introduced you to the gospel, and began my onward journey”], no church entered into PARTNERSHIP with me in giving and receiving, except you only. 16 Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again.

(Philippians 4:14–16)

Why has their giving been so exemplary? The clue is in that word that appears repeatedly in Philippians, and twice in this passage: the Greek word “koinonia”.

You remember it’s a word that means: togetherness, communion, mutual participation. What’s the connection between “togetherness” and generous giving?

The logic is this. As Christians, we’re joined TOGETHER in Christ’s body.

We are all - to use Paul’s phrase - “IN Christ”. Which means when you become a Christian, you’re as much joined to other believers as the hand is to the arm is to the shoulder is to the rest of the body.

So when the Philippians give financial gifts to Paul, as far as they’re concerned, they’re simply looking after their OWN body. His wellbeing is their wellbeing. In First Corinthians 12:26, Paul says,

If one part [of the body] suffers, all the parts suffer with it, and if one part is honored, all the parts are glad.

(1 Corinthians 12:26)

So they understand that giving to Paul is effectively giving to themselves, because they’re all part of the same body.

That’s koinonia - the Greek word is there in verse 14, where it says they “SHARED” in his trouble. And it’s there again in verse 15 where he says they “entered into PARTNERSHIP with him”.

Now, in a church this size, people sometimes say they feel disconnected from community here. We don't feel like we're sharing in it. We don't feel like we're in partnership with others. We're not feeling the "koinonia".

So what do we do?

Have you noticed that if you buy shares in a company, it changes the way you relate to them? If I buy shares in Apple, I take a much greater interest in Apple.

I check the share price with interest, I'm more likely to invest in Apple products, I'm more likely to tell others about how great they are. Why? Because I'm invested in Apple - their success is now bound up with mine.

I say this to make the simple point: if you ARE feeling like you're disconnected at Christ Community Church, have you tried investing in it? Not just time and talents, but also financially?

Jesus says in Matthew 6, "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Again, where is YOUR treasure? If I went through your trash and fished out your bank statements, would it show that in actual fact, your heart isn't here, it's somewhere else?

But you know, how you give doesn't just change how you feel affect your feelings NOW. What you give changes your eternity.

That brings us to our final heading, and I want to spend the rest of our time here. Because this is huge.

3 Be motivated by credit.

Look at verse 17. Paul says:

17 Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to YOUR CREDIT.
(Philippians 4:17)

Paul is more interested in what THEY will gain by their giving, than anything HE will gain by heir giving.

Usually when we think of giving and receiving, we tend to think that the person giving LOSES, and the person receiving GAINS.

But PAUL is saying that when you give, you GAIN. You gain credit. In fact, as Jesus makes clear, it's actually MORE blessed to give than to receive.

An alternative, but still accurate translation of this verse is "I seek the profit that accrues to YOUR account".

We're used to seeing money disappearing quickly out of our bank accounts. Taxes, insurance, utility bills, health costs, vehicle repairs, gas, groceries, clothing, buying or renting a home, maintaining a home. And then we die, and whatever we have left at that moment, goes to someone else. It's like sand running through our fingers.

But, Paul says, there IS a way of building a profit that cannot be taken from us.

You'll remember, in Matthew chapter 6, Jesus says:

19 "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, 20 but lay up for yourselves TREASURES IN HEAVEN, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal." (Matthew 6:19-20)

In other words, there is a way of gaining treasure that cannot be taken from us. When Jesus warns us not to store up treasures on earth, it's not because you might lose them. You WILL lose them! Earthly wealth is ALWAYS lost. It's not so much that storing up treasures on earth is wrong. It's that it's stupid. Because you can't take it with you. You'll never see a hearse... towing a u-haul.

John D Rockefeller was one of the richest men who ever lived. Do you know how much money Rockefeller left behind? All of it. Because you cannot take it with you.

In his book *The Treasure Principle*, Randy Alcorn says something really striking. He says: you cannot take your treasure WITH you. But you can send it AHEAD of you. By laying up treasure for yourself in heaven.

Do you remember, Philippians chapter 3 verse 20, Paul says that if you're a Christian, your citizenship is in heaven. You might ask, how does my citizenship affect my giving?

Well, like this. There was a time after Lee and I decided to get married, when I realised I would not be living in the UK for much longer.

I knew I would soon be living in a different place entirely. That my life and my citizenship would be in the USA. And I realised that there were a lot of possessions I had in the UK that I could not take with me.

So I gave away my TV and my stereo, all my CDs, many of my books. I gave away my computer.

And I started selling stuff too. Because I knew I couldn't take my goods WITH me, I COULD convert them into a currency that would be accepted in this beautiful country I was headed to. So I sold my car. I sold my bike.

Something else happened. I stopped investing in anything except the bare essentials I needed for life. Why?

Because it would have been madness to have spent money on things I wouldn't be able to take with me to the US.

The only things I spent money on were things I knew I could send on ahead of me.

So there were some books I wanted. So I ordered them from a bookstore in the US, and had them delivered to Lee so they'd be waiting for me. And I put all my money in a US bank account.

I couldn't take my treasure WITH me, but there WERE things I could send on ahead.

Your citizenship is in heaven. You will soon be living there, and not here. It is madness to invest in things that you cannot take with you.

But it is not madness to spend money on things you CAN send ahead of you. It's not madness to convert your goods into a currency that is accepted in the new creation.

A W Tozer wrote:

As base a thing as money often is, it can be transmuted into everlasting treasure. It can be converted into food for the hungry and clothing for the poor; it can keep the missionary actively winning lost men to the light of the gospel and thus transmute itself into heavenly values. Any temporal possession can be turned into everlasting wealth. Whatever is given to Christ is immediately touched with immortality.

That is what Jesus means when he says: "Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven".

How exactly do we do that? Well, those words are from Jesus' sermon on the mount. And the sermon on the mount is essentially a long list of ways that you and I can lay up treasure for ourselves in heaven.

You can lay up treasure by...

Hungering and thirsting for righteousness in Christ (Matthew 5:6)

Being humble and pure in heart (Matthew 5:5, 8)

Showing mercy (Matthew 5:7)

Making peace (Matthew 5:9)

Being persecuted for the sake of Christ (Matthew 5:10)

Being "the salt of the earth," (Matthew 5:13)

Being the light of the world (Matthew 5:14)

Following God's commands (Matthew 5:19)

Resisting anger (Matthew 5:22)

Being faithful to your spouse (Matthew 5:28, 32)

Keeping your word (Matthew 5:37)

Turning the other cheek (Matthew 5:39)

Providing for peoples' physical needs (Matthew 5:40, 42)

Going the extra mile (Matthew 5:41)

Loving your enemies (Matthew 5:44)

Praying for those who persecute you (Matthew 5:44)

Giving to the needy discreetly (Matthew 6:3)

Praying, especially praying for God's name to be revered and for his kingdom to come (Matthew 6:6ff.)

Practicing forgiveness (Matthew 6:12)

Fasting (Matthew 6:16)

Rejecting worry, and trusting instead that God would provide for your needs (Matthew 6:25)

Seeking FIRST the kingdom of God and his righteousness (Matthew 6:33)

Not judging hypocritically, but examining one's own life and integrity first (Matthew 7:1, 5)

Pursuing the things of God (Matthew 7:7)

Doing for others what you wish they would do for you (Matt 7:12)

Entering through the narrow gate, namely Christ (Matthew 7:13)

Being on guard against false prophets (Matthew 7:15)

Not merely "believing" in Jesus, but seeking to know him, and doing what he says (Matthew 7:21)

And one final way of laying up for yourself treasure in heaven: by hearing Christ's words and putting them into practice (Matthew 7:24).

That's how believers send their wealth ahead of them, where it can't be taken from us. But we only have a limited time in which we can pay into that account. And we don't know when that time will be up.

Now when we talk about storing up for ourselves treasure in heaven, what exactly IS that treasure?

Scripture teaches that the way we live now, including our giving, determines the reward we will one day receive from the Lord. This is what Paul is referring to in Philippians when he says he's looking for what may be credited to their account.

This idea of rewards in heaven is all over Scripture.

In Matthew 5:12 Jesus says to those who suffer for him, "Rejoice and be glad, for your REWARD is great in heaven". In Luke 6:23, he says, "Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your REWARD is great in heaven". In First Corinthians chapter 3 verse 8, Paul says that each Christian "will receive his wages according to his labor." In Second Corinthians chapter 9 verse 6, Paul says:

6 ...whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.

(2 Corinthians 9:6)

In Matthew 16:27, Jesus says of himself:

27 ...the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done.
(Matthew 16:27)

In other words, there is a correlation between what we have done in this life, and the reward we will receive from Him in the new creation.

To be clear, our good works have no bearing on whether we are ADMITTED to heaven, but they have EVERYTHING to do with our reward once we get there.

And some believers will receive a greater reward than others.

Now at this point, the question arises: does this mean that some of us will feel like we're missing out on something in heaven? Will we feel envy at the reward given to another brother or sister because of the generosity with which they've given? I think the answer is no, otherwise we would not experience heaven AS heaven.

In a sermon called The Portion of the Righteous, the great theologian Jonathan Edwards explains it like this:

There are different degrees of happiness and glory in heaven... The glory of the saints above will be in some proportion to their eminency in holiness and good works here.

Christ will reward all according to their works. [...]

It will be no damp to the happiness of those who have lower degrees of happiness and glory, that there are others advanced in glory above them. For all shall be perfectly happy, every one shall be perfectly satisfied.

Every vessel that is cast into this ocean of happiness is full, though there are some vessels far larger than others.

So you hear what he's saying? He is saying that if you take a thimble and a bucket, and you plunge them both into the ocean, even though they both have different capacities, they are both filled to the brim.

Neither is lacking any fullness. But nevertheless, one has a greater capacity than the other.

So it will be in heaven. Every believer, because of the way he or she has lived, will have a greater or lesser capacity to enjoy God in heaven - and yet every believer will experience heaven as perfect fullness.

The puritan John Bunyan said something very similar:

He who is most in the bosom of God, and who so acts for him here, he is the man who will be best able to enjoy most of God in the kingdom of heaven.

This is why Paul is so keen to “seek the fruit that increases to [the Philippians’] credit.” Not that their giving would benefit HIM, but rather that their giving would increase their capacity for joy in the kingdom of heaven.

Imagine two people at a concert. One of the people knows relatively little about the artist, maybe knows one or two of his songs. The other person has been following the artist for years, and his songs mean the world to her.

Now both people thoroughly enjoy the concert. But who enjoys it more?

The one who has spent her time and money getting to know the artist as well as they can. Her capacity for enjoying the concert is deeper and richer. So it will be for those who have spent their lives laying up treasure in heaven.

What we GET when we GIVE... is so much more than a dopamine hit.

It’s so much more than a sense of freedom from material things, and it’s so much more than an increased sense of “koinonia” with our fellow believers, as wonderful as these things are.

What we get when we give... is more of Christ when we come into his kingdom.

In the words of Bunyan, those who give most, will be “best able to enjoy most of God in the kingdom of heaven.”

Let’s pray.