

## **Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> January 2022 – The Gift of Generosity (2 Corinthians 9:6-15)**

At this time of year, many people choose to do something to benefit their health. Some make it a resolution, others don't: but whether it's committing to exercise, changing your diet, or giving up something unhealthy for a season, much of our thinking in January focuses on improving our wellbeing in some way.

However, what's interesting about the research on this whole matter of health and wellbeing is that often **the most powerful things we can do to improve our wellbeing are not what we do for ourselves, but what we do for others**. Generosity, it turns out, is incredibly good for your health. Not only does the research show that generous people are happier and more purposeful, they are also healthier: volunteers in one piece of research had lower blood pressure and reduced stress levels after a season of practising generosity in some way than when they started. When Jesus said it was more blessed to give than to receive, it turns out this is true in more than just a spiritual sense.

Over the next three weeks we'll be looking at the three gifts of the wise men – and for once we'll be focusing, not on the symbolic meaning of each in terms of what it tells us about Jesus, but rather on the actual gifts themselves. These were precious items that the Magi gave away, and they represent three of the most powerful but also most challenging areas of what it means to follow Jesus. Over the following two weeks we'll look at selfless service and prayer: but today we start with gold – in other words with the thorny topic of money and financial generosity.

And let's remember, as we start, that the Magi's gift of gold was not only important in signifying Jesus' royal status. In the short-term, this gold kept the family alive as they fled to Egypt. What could have provided their food and shelter as they fled with nothing but what they could carry? I imagine the gold was literally a life-saver. This is a very practical gift that did what financial generosity usually does: meet someone's real and immediate needs.

And for **as long as there have been followers of Jesus, generosity has been a characteristic of what it means to be a Christian**. The direction of this generosity has also been consistent: Christians have given to people in need and also to the ministry and mission of the church. That was true in the very first church, and remains true now. The exact proportion allotted to each will vary for each person, and across time: but money invested in blessing people both spiritually and physically remains part of a healthy financial diet.

But what are the guidelines for how we give? Today's passage gives us two very clear pointers – though the sting in the tail is that these don't tell us how much or how often: if you want an easy rule to follow you won't find it here! Rather, they encourage us to examine our hearts and our motives. **The first is this: you reap what you sow.** Or as St Paul says, if you sow sparingly, you'll reap sparingly; if you sow generously, you'll reap generously.

In other words, our attitude to financial giving says a lot about what we really think about God.

And Paul paints a picture of two circles: the vicious circle where we give as little as we can get away with, which in turn restricts God's capacity to bless us, which in all likelihood perpetuates this sense of holding on to what we've got, and so on.

In contrast, if we sow generously, we'll find this comes back to us in other ways. And anyone who's tried it, will tell you this is true: an unexpected gift here, an unexpected saving or rebate there. This in turn builds faith and perpetuates a lifestyle which flows with generosity and grace.

**The bottom line is: God always repays.** Or as the passage promises to those who choose to practise financial generosity: our 'God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things, at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.' (v8)

It doesn't make logical sense, but there is more going on here than logic. God's kingdom turns the world upside down. This is a particularly important issue at present as our headlines are full of fears about the cost of living, and other financial challenges. And these are real, and will impact many of us. But what this passage does is **re-frame the question in an extraordinary way: the question is not 'can we afford to be generous?' but rather 'can we afford not to be generous?'**

But let's also notice the second pointer: **what we give is not a matter of obligation or compulsion.** God's not interested in grudging gifts, which is why there's no set amount required. Giving is as much about us, and the state of our hearts, as it is about the people receiving the gifts. It's why I never sign up to the charity hustlers who approach me in the street or call me on the telephone, because they rely on creating a sense of shame or obligation to make you give. Most of them are for great causes, and I will happily reflect in my own time on whether to make a donation to some of those charities, but it's got to come from a sense of cheerful calling rather than pressure.

And, as I close, that leads me to the one bit of practical advice I would give you about practising financial generosity and that is the simple word: **plan.** Plan how generous you're going to be and where you're going to give your gifts to. There is a place for spontaneous generosity, but don't use that as an excuse to do nothing for months at a time. All of us spend time thinking about money: but we need to give our giving the same time and attention that we do our spending and saving. Make it a high priority that gets attended to near the top of the list rather than as an afterthought. As Paul says, decide it in your heart – pray about it, plan, and go for it.

**Why? Because it's one of the most wonderful and powerful things we can do. And it blesses you!** This is what Paul is saying here: giving unlocks God's blessing, not just for others but for *you*. If I was to ask a bunch of Christians how they might experience more of God's blessings, most would say things like: pray, and read the bible, and join a loving Christian community, and these are all true, of course. But this passage reminds us that we can add generosity to that list. What goes around, comes around. Sow generously, reap generously. And our great 'God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.' Amen.