

Stewardship 2 – Luke 19-1:11 – “God’s Generosity and Ours”

Welcome to week 2 of the stewardship sermon series!

For those that weren’t here last week
and for those that fell asleep let me recap a little of what I said

I said that as a church and as individuals we face two related decisions
I likened those decisions to junctions on a motorway
we can either decide to press on
or we can do a U-turn and go back on ourselves

I believe that the Lord has been doing great things
both here in our community
and around the edges as we’ve sought to take out
... the good news, the gospel

The calling from God is to grow in this
to follow where he leads
to draw more people towards his love and salvation

We are a called people
and the first decision we face,
the first junction we come to, as it were,
... is - are we going to continue in this
are we going to go forward where God leads?

We’re not sure where this will take us, at least I’m not sure
by my answer, and I hope yours, is
“yes”, of course we want to do that

But as I explained, there is a second decision
a second junction
one which goes hand in hand with the first

Will our giving match our calling?

Looking at our giving to the church over the past four years
it’s declined by 20%

In practical terms, one implication is that the charities that we support
are having to cope with a big decline in what we give
another implication is we have to face the problem
of how we continue to employ Karen, Levy and Pam

I tried to make it clear that we have to up our giving - substantially
just as we have to stretch our faith to follow God’s leading in mission
so we have to stretch our faith in stewardship
these two things go together

As I see it, this is first and foremost a heart issue
my prayer is that the Lord will plant a seed of desire in us
to face this challenge
a seed only he can plant
a seed only we can personally nurture
my prayer is that God’s will will flourish

These junctions present us with this twin-decision
to continue on the journey of discipleship
or to do a U-turn

The choice is between discipleship and non-discipleship
there is a cost to discipleship (both literally and metaphorically)
and we have to be honest and realistic about that
but we have to see equally clearly that
there’s a cost to non-discipleship - and it’s a greater cost

If we want a quiet, dull, limited life-less church life
if we want a form of religion, marked by an absence of God
and a quenched Holy Spirit
then non-discipleship will certainly provide that
that’s the cost

Today's theme builds on last time
we're going to be looking at God's heart and ours
and we're going to start with a Bible reading that may be familiar
it's the story of Zacchaeus
the height-challenged man who climbed a tree to see Jesus

** READ Luke 19:1-11

Before we look in more detail at this
I wanted to point something out I hadn't quite realised before

Jesus refers to money an awful lot in the gospel accounts
more often than not to illustrate some point he's trying make

Here are a few examples

He uses money

to illustrate faithfulness
in the parable of the talents (Lk 19)
faithfulness is likened to the making of making a profit

to illustrate mercy and care for someone
the parable of the good Samaritan (Lk 10)
he pays an inn-keeper to look after the injured man

to illustrate God's heart for seeking the lost
the parable of the woman with ten coins (Lk 15)
she loses one and searches high and low for the missing coin

To illustrate forgiveness
the parable of the money lender cancelling debts (Lk 7)
the bigger the debt that's cancelled, the greater the gratitude
the bigger the sense of forgiveness, again, the greater the gratitude

These are all from Luke

in fact, Luke has more on money than the other gospel writers
having said that here's one from John's gospel

In John 19:30, Jesus even used money imagery on the cross
his final, dying words were "it is finished"
in the original language, tetelestai, the word was used on bills
it means - paid in full
the cross saw our sin debt paid for in full

Why does Jesus use money so much to drive his point home?
perhaps two reasons

First, that money is something we all understand
it's practical, easily measurable, and so on
it's how we measure the value of something

This makes Jesus' teaching highly practical
not dealing in airy-fairy or esoteric concepts
it roots what he says in everyday reality
helping us to place value on such spiritual things
... as the power of forgiveness
... the importance of being faithful, and so on

Second, money, or rather our use of it,
often reveals something about us
our spending patterns reveals our values
they show what our real priorities are
we say, don't we, "put your money where your mouth is"

Our use of money mirrors the true condition of our heart
in other words, money is a yardstick for our lives

Developing that a bit more, I believe that maturity in faith is revealed this way
maturity in the Christian faith doesn't come with age
it comes with increasing surrender to God
it comes with a growing measure of trust in him
and so our use of our financial resources is an indicator of maturity

Let's look at Zacchaeus,
because he's a brilliant example of what I'm trying to say

We read that Zac wasn't just a tax collector
he was a chief tax collector
he had a bunch of ordinary tax collectors working for him

The nation of Israel was situated at a trade cross roads
this was a clever thing to do on God's part to place his people
... in such a strategically important situation

Anyone wanting to travel north to south, east to west, or vice versa
were forced to pass through Israel
There was the Mediterranean to the west and desert to the east
and as they travelled through there was the opportunity
to take a fee, a tax, for doing so

The other important factor was that Israel was at that time occupied
The Romans had conquered Israel in 63 BC
and their main reason for doing so was to collect taxes

How did the locals feel?
How do you think they felt! they hated it!

Who did the Romans employ to collect the taxes - usually local people
the way it worked was that the Romans told the tax collectors
how much to collect in total
anything above that they could keep

As you can imagine, tax collectors were onto a good thing
protected by the Roman state, they became rich people

And again, as you might imagine,
chief collectors were onto an even better thing
they were stinking rich

The whole thing was rife with corruption
and it would be fair to say that Zacchaeus wasn't exactly popular
a collaborator swindler extortionist
and those were his good points

It's not revealed what Zac felt about himself
the Bible doesn't really do psychology
but we might expect Zac to be a lonely isolated man

Whatever he felt, whatever people thought of him
he was eager to see Jesus
and Jesus was passing through Jericho that day
this wasn't just idle curiosity
there was a genuine desire to see him

In fact he was so keen to see him, that,
being a little man, he climbed up a tree to get a good view
that no doubt would have brought a few jeers his way - he didn't care

Imagine how Zac must have felt when Jesus first looked up at him
then spoke to him
telling him to come down
then invited himself round to Zac's home

Zac was overwhelmed
he dashed down and welcomed him into his home
turning a deaf ear to the murmurings of the crowd

Something happened to Zac in that encounter with Jesus
something on the inside
some seed of desire planted in him when he first heard about Jesus
suddenly burst into life

There was an astonishing conversion, an amazing transformation

How do we know that?
Well, what happened ... he stood up and declared certain things
he said: Here and now, I give half of all I have to the poor
and then maybe even more remarkably
if I've cheated anyone
(Cheated anyone! That wasn't exactly going to be a short list)
if I've cheated anyone I will repay four times the amount

The law required a fifth extra for cheating like that
Zac was prepared to repay 20 times the going rate
he's was under no compulsion to do that
no prompt from Jesus was needed
it was a natural overflow of his newly transformed heart

Jesus replied - "salvation has come to this house"
Salvation didn't come because Zac paid up
he didn't earn salvation - it was the other way around
the money was returned because he was saved that day

Generosity is the mark of the redeemed heart
generosity in Zac, generosity in us,
should be the response to God's generosity shown to us

The account of Zac shows us clearly that money
both before and after meeting Jesus
reveals the condition of our heart
unveils of our true spiritual state

There's a video clip I'd like us watch
this is a great clip from the life of Brian

** VIDEO

OK - what has God ever done for us?
Apart from what has God ever done for us?

There's a lovely prayer in the service book which puts this beautifully
it goes:
"Father of all, when we were still far off
you met us in your Son and brought us home
Dying and living, he declared your love,
gave us grace and opened the gate of glory.

Apart from just about everything - what has God ever done for us?

The prayer continues
"May we who share Christ's body live his risen life;
we who drink his cup bring life to others;
we whom the Spirit lights give light to the world."

In other words - God you have given us so much
may we give away what we have been given
passing the blessing on
may your generosity to us inspire us to be generous ourselves

Is that a prayer we want answered?

The way we spend and use our money
says a lot about us
it says a lot about to what extent we have let God change us

The way we spend and use money speaks eloquently about
how much the character of Christ has been formed in us

As we allow his character to be formed in us by the Holy Spirit
so we begin to see life in a new light
so our priorities begin to change

I remember a story told by Mike Hill, who was our Bishop a while back
when he was Vicar at Chesham Bois

There was a businessman in his congregation
I'm not sure how long he'd been a member
but he went through some kind of renewal experience

This man came to speak with Mike and said
... that he realised he needed to change how he gave to the church
something more than just the change in his pocket
not only that, he wanted to make a one-off contribution
for the years he'd not given as he felt he ought to have done

He then handed Mike a cheque for a quarter of a million pounds

If there's anyone here today ...

Actually, it's interesting what Mike did at that point
he said his church at that time
... didn't have the maturity to handle this kind of gift
and he help the businessman find appropriate charities
to offload to

What I'm saying is this ...

God's heart is one of love for us
that love is shown in particular in all that Jesus did for us
in the sacrifice he made for us
in the friendship he offers us

The call goes out to us from Jesus
come down - be with me - I want to come to your home
I want to be a friend to you
how are we going to respond?

Let's get practical

the envelopes with the stewardship materials in have gone out
if you didn't collect one last Sunday
you should have received one by post during the week
if not - once again, there are some spares in the foyer

If you haven't done so yet ... please read the enclosed leaflets
if you haven't done so yet ... please pray about this
take this really seriously
as you pray, dwell on all that God has done for you
meditate on that; weigh it up

Like Zacchaeus, respond in a way that stretches your faith
because that's what faith is about
transferring what you trust in to God

Let me reiterate what I said last week and today at the beginning
we need to match our giving to our calling

We need to stretch ourselves in what we give

Not only do we need to catch up from several lean years of giving
we need to add to that further so we can expand what we do

I'm looking for, I'm praying for,
not a small step up - but a whole flight of stairs
something substantial
and I believe we can do this
if we let God inspire and motivate us
if we nurture the seed of desire for his kingdom

I know that there are some that are new to this church
and this kind of teaching may have come as a shock
if you're unsure about all this
then let me say once again that there is a cost to following Jesus
we can't pretend otherwise

But, and this is a big but

there's a far greater cost to not following Jesus
in not following we forfeit so much blessing
so much freedom
so much peace
so much joy and excitement

Think what Zacchaeus would have been like if Jesus hadn't passed through
or if he hadn't called up to him in his tree
Zacchaeus would have remained a lonely man
... imprisoned by all his wealth
Zacchaeus would have been wealthy
- able to live a life of great comfort
but he'd have been lost eternally

If you are new, then please understand, these are the values & principles
we stand for here
and you too are invited to consider some kind of response

Let me conclude by saying that

if I'm really honest, it's taken me some time to get to what
I believe is more or less the right place for me with God

It has been a bit of a struggle at times

to align what I have with what I believe

God challenged me a while back to become more generous

and there's still plenty of heart-work to be accomplished

still more converting to take place

I'm not completely free yet

but - I'm freer than I used to be

and I'm really grateful for that

Will you join me in this?

Let there be no U-turns in this church

only a renewed desire for more of God

greater gratitude

and greater generosity