

Stewardship 5: “Tithing and grace” – Phil 4, Mk 12, 2 Cor 8, Mt 5, 6

I had a puzzling dream the other night
I dreamed I was in heaven
standing next to me was an angel

And in this dream, arriving at the pearly gates
came Geoff, Mark and Jay
I was pleased to see that at least they’d got that far

And as I watched, Geoff was allowed in
but as that happened a monkey was chained to him
and the monkey was constantly messing his hair up
and sticking his fingers in Geoff’s ears and nose

And I asked the angel, “What does this mean”

“Geoff started out straight and true ... but towards the end
he started monkeying around
so this monkey has been chained to him as a reminder of that

Next in my dream came Mark
and a big ape was chained to him

And as Mark walked forward, the ape would tug on the chain
and knock Mark to the ground

And I asked the angel, “What does this mean”

“Mark started out straight and true ... but towards the end
he started aping around
so this ape has been chained to him as a reminder of that

Finally, in my dream came Jay

To him was chained the most attractive woman you have ever seen

And I asked the angel, “What does this mean?”

“This woman started out straight and true ...”

Let us pray

Sometimes a message doesn’t turn out quite the way I’d planned
Back in January, I mapped out the six talks
with the readings and roughly the ideas I was going to talk about
Each time the Spirit has taken me down a slightly different path

That’s true today as well
the theme is “Tithing and grace”
but it will be mostly about grace

The Bible passage I chose has been cut and pasted a bit
and I’ve added a few more verses
so if you’re following from a Bible you’ll need to keep up

I want to start with a verse we looked at last week from 2 Cor 9 - verse 8

“God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times,
having all you need, you will abound in every good work.”

Do you remember we talked about
the four “alls”, the two “abounds” and the “every”

Let’s read this verse together as a reminder, but let’s make it personal
instead of “you” insert “I” and “me”

And again, but with “we” and “us” instead of “you” - for the church

Lord, I pray this abundance mind-set verse fills our minds
and transforms our hearts and lives
Help us to receive this word for ourselves and our church community

Last week I held an imaginary conversation with Carole Flynn
(Who couldn't be here)
about some tapes I have
the speaker was James Ryle at New Wine in 1997 (I think)
(Are they your tapes or mine?)

Carole - do you remember the definition of grace that James offered?

“Grace is the empowering presence of God, enabling us to be who God created us to be and to do what he called us to do”

And, as we've just repeated,
“God is able to make all grace abound to us”

The Holy Spirit has been given to us
to dwell in us as God empowering presence
to fulfil his creation desire that we may become all he made us to be
his creation desire that we might fulfill all he has for us to do

God's grace, his empowering presence, will provide
all we need to fulfil those two things

How do we see ourselves?
What God sees is potential
and his grace, if we will let him, releases that potential

What we're looking at is how God's grace can release that potential
in our stewardship
in our giving to the church

Turn, please, to Philippians 4:11-13

“I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well-fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything in him who gives me strength.”

If you read the Book of Acts, you'd see Paul led an interesting life
He travelled hundred (thousands) of miles and endured shipwrecks
he experienced the joy of being received with open arms
he experienced the pain of rejection
He knew the highest of highs, he knew the lowest of lows

He knew what it was to live with a flowing supply
and what it was to live with very little

He didn't let the knowledge of plenty drag him down when there was little

As a consequence, I think Paul knew how to give in both circumstances
because his inner life knew contentment

I believe we have be a community so touched by grace
so filled with God's empowering presence
that from a profound sense of contentment
we also know how to give in all circumstances

Because grace is there to enable is to be who we were created to be
and to do what we're called to do

We sons and daughters of the Father,
born again of the Spirit
into the life and likeness of Jesus

And because grace is available to enable to fulfil our calling
we can abound in the good work of giving

We see here that Paul refers to two circumstances - need and plenty
let's think about them both, one after the other
and then we'll add a third circumstance not described by Paul

Let's consider the situation when financial resources are limited
there are a couple of short passages for us to consider

First is: Mk 12:41-44

Jesus is watching different people putting their gifts
into the temple collection plate
the wealthy ones were putting a lot in

A poor widow, however, put in two small coins
they were the smallest that could be put in
in fact, the coins were so physically small
it was difficult to stamp the metal discs out into coins

Jesus had spotted something here - she put in two coins
she could have given one and kept the other - with some justification
but it was both coins
Jesus noted the fact that she gave all she had

But here's the point
Jesus having carefully observed what had taken place
told his disciples she had given more than all the others

Kingdom economics not the same as the economics of Barclay's Bank
"More than" is calculated in a different way

Turn quickly to 2 Corinthians 8:1-3
"And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God
has given the Macedonian churches ..."

There's that word grace again
What's grace mean ...?
What has the empowering Presence of God done ...?

"... Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their
extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they
gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability."

How can someone tell me how anyone can give beyond their ability to give?
It reminds of those footballers who tell the interviewer
I gave it 110% out there on the pitch
no they didn't - it's not physically possible

How did the Macedonian Christians give beyond their ability to give?
Only God can have done the impossible
we're not told how,
but it seems to me the only way this could possibly happen
is if God adds to the supply

Bringing these two things together
"More" in the kingdom isn't just about quantity
it's about the heart behind it

ALLISON / ANDY story ...

For those whose ability to give is limited by what resources they have
what can we conclude

First - limited resources doesn't prevent sacrificial giving
the widow and the Macedonian church both managed that
(And Andy/Allison's lady, too)

Second - sacrificial giving isn't primarily
... a matter of the quantity put in the plate
it's matter of (everyone...) the heart

Thirdly, if there's a spirit of generosity
it seems to unlock or release God's resources
an atmosphere of generosity is created
in which the blessings of heaven can be liberated

Fourthly - God honours those who give, even out of the little they have
God honours you - just as the widow was held up for honour by Jesus
and the Macedonians by Paul
so the Lord lifts you up

It's very important we should do the same
some who only have a little feel guilty because it's only a little
... they can give - that's not right
if you sacrifice - know that you are honoured

And if you're honoured, then you are given more grace
and the amazing thing is that
... somehow God is able to add to what you supply

So before I go on, let's pray for these people

Father - there are people in our church
people on low fixed incomes
those who struggle to make ends meet
those who are having to cope with unemployment or shorter hours
and yet who manage to give
who manage to give sacrificially

Father, we honour them, and ask you to pour out your grace on them
release more resources into their lives
supply what they lack, Lord

Now - to the other side of the fence
- to those who do have adequate or more resources at their disposal

There's one issue I feel I need to clear up
you see - I've heard people say
the Old Testament is about law
the New Testament is about grace
I am not under the law, I'm under grace

Tithing is a part of the law in the Old Testament, they continue,
therefore I'm not bound by that
because I'm under grace

They might even quote a verse such as
"For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing
the law" (Rom 3:28)

If what they're thinking is "I'm off the hook" - then they need to think again
listen to a series of verses from Mt gospel
I'm going to run through these quickly, so I hope you can keep up

Chapter 5 - let's start at v 17

"Do not think I have come to abolish the Law and the Prophets;
I have not come to abolish them, but to fulfil them."

Now look at these

v 21 "You have heard it said to people long ago, 'Do not murder ...' But I tell
you anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to
judgment."

v 27 "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery', but I tell you
anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed
adultery in his heart."

It's the same story in verses 31, 33, 38, and 43
You have heard it said, but I say to you

There's a pattern - a verse from the law is read out, and Jesus adds to it
in each case, Jesus intensifies the law
he completes it rather than abolishes it

No longer is it just the outer action, the outward observance, that counts
(Which is the only thing law can touch and lay claim to)
but the inner motive is put under the spotlight as well

In other words, there's no way grace can be thought of
as letting us off the tithing hook
as allowing us some kind of loophole

Grace doesn't make for some kind of easier life
though it makes for a more joyful one
grace is what enables us to live in a way pleasing to God, remember
it's what empowers us to have an abundance mind-set
it's what reproduces the character of Jesus in us

The same principles apply to everyone

Sacrificial giving - which is giving from a heart bent towards God's calling
God honours that
and God releases blessing and resources to you

Remember what Malachi prophesied
"Bring the whole tithe into the store house"

I don't know what proportion of church are in this latter better-off category
I'm pretty sure I am
we need to pray that from our abundance we can give abundantly
that we may abound in that good work
for the sake of the mission and ministry here

There may be additional circumstances which have to be taken into account
but tithing to the church is the norm
May grace abound to us to enable this

I said earlier that there is a third situation which Paul didn't cover
and that's where one partner would like to give but is prevented
... from doing so by the other

I know quite a number who are in this position
and I know what tension it can cause
I know what feelings of guilt it can engender
inappropriate guilt, of course

I don't think there's a one size-fit-all answer
though here's one idea

I did hear of a believing wife
... whose husband was an unbeliever who didn't like the idea
... of any money going to the church

He heard about tithing though, about the promise given through Malachi
that God blesses in return
and also that God says quite clearly, "test me in this"

So he tithed as an unbeliever for a number of months
(about six month, I think it was)
and because of what he received as a consequence
because he discovered God's loving blessing character
he became a Christian

That's something isn't it?
Someone becomes a believer because they tithed!?
God's character was revealed through this strange act of obedience
I think a few believers might learn something from that unbeliever

I don't know, maybe if you're in this boat
you could try something similar

For believers, tithing has to be more of a discipline than an experiment
but maybe if you have a non-believing spouse
then you could put to them the proposition
that they allow you to tithe for an experimental period
say, for six months
and see what happens

Just a thought ... that may not be possible of course,
but there might be a conversation to be had which might lead to a
kind of "let's see what God can do" deal being struck
something to think about, isn't it?

If this is for you, or if it isn't
God will honour whatever you are able to give sacrificially
from the resources you do have at your disposal
if it's the housekeeping, for example,
I'm sure there must be ways of turning savings into offerings

Whatever circumstances we find ourselves in
all of us are called to trust in God for provision
to put our faith in his ability to supply our needs
to place our lives within his promises
and to seek his grace, his empowering presence

To close, I'd like us to do something similar
... to what we did a couple of weeks ago
we prayed for the person to the left and right of us

Before I do - let me ask
if that prayer made some kind of difference to you
would you put a hand up
(I'm not going to ask for details ...)

Thank you Lord // We definitely need to pray again!

As we did last time
if you're comfortable just placing a hand on the person next to you
or an arm round their shoulder and they're OK with that - go ahead
if not - don't worry - just remain as you are

And remember
as we pray - we don't want wimpy giving, so no wimpy prayers
say after me "no wimpy prayers ... no wimpy giving"

[Pray
First that God's grace will come to them
they will become all that God created them to be
they will do all that God called them to do
that the potential placed in them will be realised

Second that God blesses them

Third - pray for release
for a release of generosity
not just as a one-off but as a life-style