

Giving

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[0 : 00] Well, good evening. Great to be here. Thanks for your invite. I was really excited that I was able to get out of Glasgow for work reasons, of course, as a minister tonight.

But just very exciting to actually be able to get in the car and use it after so long of being very, very local at home. It's great to be back at Brunfield to see some familiar faces, and I pray that God will bless us tonight.

Let me bring you some greetings just from the constituency of FIEC churches that I work for and represent across Scotland and beyond.

We've been trying to support churches over this strange time, over the last eight months, with some weekly webinars for church leaders across the UK, trying to update them on the kind of various developments, but also just some of the challenges of leadership at a time like this.

And we've had a few separate Scottish webinars to update churches on particular guidance. And I've been trying to send out some summary papers to pastors and others, which hopefully Graeme Shanks and others might have received here as well.

[1 : 09] But God's work is going on, despite all the restrictions and limitations. We're delighted that we welcomed into FIC family the new church plant out at South Queensferry, which I know you'll be very familiar with, Christ Church there.

The work in Aviemore is moving forward. Of course, like everything else, it's been sort of strange and changed in many ways. But it was great that Kenny Rogan and Leslie Rogan, the church planting family there, were able to buy a house in the town this summer.

That was a great prayer point for us. And as Kenny said to me, he said, it's exactly where you would buy a house if you're looking at a map of Aviemore and wanted to plant a church. So that's been a huge provision of God.

And we pray that will help them to make contacts and to get settled in the community. And we've also been able this year to support revitalisation work in Mary Hill in Glasgow and a cross-cultural worker at Harper Church, along with the just day-to-day and week-to-week kind of pastoral support and connecting of churches and ministries.

I just wanted to let you know that despite all the limitations, God is still at work, and I'm sure he is as well, in lots of ways. Well, please do have your Bible open at that passage in 2 Corinthians chapter 8.

[2 : 34] We'll probably flick over to chapter 9 as well, because both chapter 8 and 9 deal with the subject of giving. You've been doing a topical series, I believe, and tonight's subject is we need to talk about giving.

So we're dealing with a taboo subject. So maybe just as well as no children here tonight. Indeed, it's a subject that the Times newspaper once called the last taboo in an article which was subtitled, Why it's okay to talk about sex and death, but never salaries.

Or in other words, why talking about personal wealth is one of the last no-go areas in polite society. It's a subject, of course, that we can feel uncomfortable about when we come to discussing it.

And to preach on the subject of giving, believe you me, feels like entering a bit of a potential minefield. Listeners perhaps feel an edge waiting for the guilt trip or the high-pressure appeal. Don't worry, there's not going to be one of those tonight. And speakers feel anxious about looking self-interested and not least their own shortcomings. And there are some good reasons why we might have that kind of discomfort as we come to a subject like this.

[3 : 52] One of the great evils of the Western Church in recent decades has been the exporting of the prosperity gospel to Africa and other parts of the developing world.

It's ministers on the God channels promising riches for those who just have enough faith. It's a Christianity, of course, that ultimately produces guilt and, worst of all, disillusionment with Jesus. And ministries, incidentally, that don't even believe their own theology. They tell us that whatever you give, you will get back 10, 20, 30, 100-fold. Which begs the question, why don't they just do that with their own money in the first place?

Get back that great increase and save us all the appeals. As John Stott said, we have to have the courage to reject the health and wealth gospel.

Absolutely. It's a false gospel. So we're rightly cautious then to avoid any sense of a preoccupation with money.

[5 : 01] But the other danger, of course, if we go to the other extreme, is that we make money a kind of no-go area in church. But money is a big issue in the world.

It's a big issue in our lives, let's face it. It is a key component in everyday living. So we would expect the Bible to have something to say about it. And it does.

Lots, in fact. Jesus talked five times as much, or rather the New Testament has five times as much teaching on money as it does in the subject of prayer.

Jesus talked far more about money in his ministry than he did about sex. So a church without regular teaching on money would be as negligent as a church who never taught about prayer.

So as we go into this subject, and we're going to just pick a few of the kind of main points out of these passages in 2 Corinthians tonight, let's just clear the undergrowth a little bit and establish a few basic truths from the Bible.

[6 : 08] And the first one is that the material world was created by God and is a gift to be enjoyed.

That means that having things and resources and being able to acquire things is legitimate. Indeed, it is a blessing. 1 Timothy chapter 4 and verse 4.

For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving. God, of course, blessed Israel with material things, good lands, crops, prosperity.

Heaven will be a real place. There will be great plenty there to enjoy. So there is nothing wrong with the appropriate possession and use and enjoyment of material things.

That's the first point. The second point is that being rich is not wrong, neither is poor to be glorified.

[7 : 19] There are many godly men and women in the Bible who were wealthy. However, Abraham, Job, Philemon, contrastingly, the ungodly poor are never set up as role models.

As Andrew Boner Law very well put it, far better a rich man seeking God than a poor man seeking riches.

But of course, wealth does, in a fallen world, present some real dangers to us. It's one of the primary reasons that people turn away from God.

Wealth can easily create a self-reliance, a pride, a love of comfort that displaces God in people's lives. And so we need to be wary of it and careful and cautious in our use of it and where our hearts go in relation to it.

But being rich in itself is not wrong, neither is poverty some great virtue in and of itself. And then the third and final point as we go into this subject is that the New Testament sees financial giving as a barometer of spiritual health.

[8 : 38] We saw something of that in the passage that was read to us by Ailey on the screen. Paul writes, I'm not commanding you in this area of giving, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others.

Paul is making a link there between their attitude to giving, their earnestness in giving, and to the spiritual temperature, we might say, of their hearts.

Luke chapter 12 and verse 34 says, For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

That is, where your money goes tells you something about where your heart is. That's the word of Jesus himself.

But not the order of that verse, which we'd had it on the screen, but the order of the verse says, where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. And in closer reading, we might think, is that not a little bit back to front?

[9 : 45] Shouldn't the order be, where your heart is, there your treasure will be also. After all, surely our money will follow our hearts and not vice versa, as seems to be what Jesus says in Luke chapter 12.

But of course, Jesus never fumbles his words. And I think there is something very practical in this about the order that Jesus puts it in. Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. That is, where we put our money will influence and shape our concerns. That is, our hearts. If I choose to give money to a mission in India, then guess what? I'm likely to find I'm a lot more interested and concerned about mission in India than I might otherwise have been. If I give a gift to the youth group, you know what? The youth group is probably likely to nudge its way up my prayer list because I've suddenly got a bit of an investment in it.

[10:57] You see, one of the ways that you can start to shape your heart around heavenly things is by making the very cold and practical decision to put some of your cash into them.

Where your treasure is, your heart will be also. Now, God isn't some heavenly sheriff of Nottingham. He is not obsessed with your wallets or just taking your cash for its own sake. God, of course, owns the cattle on a thousand hills. And as somebody has said, he owns the hills as well. He is the self-sufficient one. Acts chapter 17. He has no need of anything. He's the one who has made and gives everything to everyone. In 1 Corinthians, Paul asked the question, what do you have that you did not receive? It's a rhetorical question, of course, isn't it? Because the answer is nothing. We enter the world naked and one day we will leave everything behind.

[12:04] So God isn't interested obsessively in some kind of unhealthy way about your bank balance, but he is interested in your heart.

He's interested in the kind of people that you and I are. You see, the world around us sees the accumulation of money and possessions as the yardstick of measuring somebody's worth and significance and value and importance.

We know that, don't we? We see that all the time. If you've got cash, you will get attention and status and prestige. If you're poor, nobody's that interested in what you think or who you are. But Jesus calls in his people to have a very different set of values. Now notice at the centre of the passage that we read in 2 Corinthians chapter 8, right at the heart of it, where Paul is encouraging and indeed expecting that Christians will give of themselves financially, he traces it all back to the gospel itself.

chapter 8 and verse 9. We know this verse so well, don't we? It's a great verse to memorise. Paul says, For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you, through his poverty, might become rich.

[13:36] Jesus gave up his riches unselfishly, generously, out of love for us.

Our God is the great giver, giving up even his own son, that indescribable gift, as he has described at the end of chapter 9, for our welfare.

Our saviour and Lord Jesus Christ gave up even his own life for your sake and mine.

Think of it this way. Your life and my life, if we're Christians tonight, were rescued and turned around because someone who was rich gave up that wealth in order to intervene in our lives. Isn't that amazing? There we were in spiritual rags, and the richest person in the universe gave away his money that we might be showered with blessings and raised up to heavenly places.

[14:50] Paul says it is this gospel truth that should shape and direct us in how we use our wealth. How amazing to be able to give away the resources, the finance that we have, so that other people might have their lives transformed.

That is the privilege and the purpose, the prize of the money that you and I give to gospel work. People hear the gospel.

They see the love of Christ in action, and through that investment, by the grace of God, they too can move from spiritual ruin to spiritual riches.

You see, when you give, you are living out the gospel. So if we think of Christian giving as just another unwelcome tax, if giving becomes a reluctant duty, as Paul describes it in chapter 9, verse 7, something which is done kind of grudgingly under some kind of compulsion, if it's resented, then we have totally lost sight of the gospel.

That's why Christian giving isn't based on legalistic commands. That's why Paul says there in verse 8, I'm not commanding you. This isn't something that you're going to be dragged kicking and screaming to do.

[16:17] But if you get the gospel, if you get verse 9, if you understand how God has used his riches to transform your life, then all of a sudden, giving becomes something which is a privilege

and a joy and a blessing to be invited to do.

Now, in 2 Corinthians, Paul writes to encourage and advise Christians about their financial giving. And in the instance of chapter 8 and chapter 9, it was organizing a gift to help struggling Christians elsewhere, poor churches back in Judea.

But we also know from Corinthians that Paul expected that Christians would give financially for other causes too, such as the support of gospel workers.

that it was right that appropriately gifted and godly people could be set aside for gospel work and paid for by those they served for the work that they did.

That is a good biblical principle. Well, very practically, just in the time that we have, let me just highlight three practical points about giving from these verses.

[17:37] So very briefly then. Firstly, plan your giving. Plan your giving. Be organized. Chapter 9, verse 4, Paul says to them, he says, For if any Macedonians come with me and find you unprepared in this matter of organizing a gift, we, not to say anything about you, would be ashamed of having been so confident.

So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to visit you in advance and finish the arrangements for the generous gift you have promised. You see, Paul is saying, you know, get organized in this area.

You know, do a bit of preparation. You know, plan ahead here so it's not just a complete disaster or kind of muddle when the time comes to collect this money. Because the fact is, as you and I well know, that if our giving isn't planned, it probably won't amount to that much.

You know, a kind of piecemeal approach of what have I got on me on a Sunday morning? Well, it's not going to deliver much, is it really? Never good. Or, just, well, what's left over at the end of the month?

Well, that's probably not going to be very much, is it? That kind of approach to giving, kind of haphazard, last minute, you know, end of the list, is not, verse 7, to excel in this grace of giving, is it?

[19:04] That's why, let me say, practically, a standing order is really good. It prioritizes your giving. Verse 5, it kind of makes that statement that giving for gospel work is your first priority or one of your first priorities.

It's first to the Lord there in verse 5. To get that, it doesn't have to be everything you give, but it might just be that base amount that you know is regularly established and will go out come what may.

Likewise, let me just say, signing the gift aid form. Please, if you're a taxpayer, do that for your Christian giving. It's not getting a gift from the government, it's just getting some of your own money back that can then be used for gospel work.

So plan your giving, be organized. Maybe that's the one take-home thing that somebody needs to take away tonight or somebody who's watching this online is simply to get onto their laptop later on or tomorrow and to set up a standing order.

That would be a great outcome from this in this area. As simple as that. But secondly, let me say, stretch yourself in giving.

[20:21] You see that in verse 3. He writes of these Christians, the Macedonian Christians, for I testify that they gave as much as they were able and even beyond their ability.

Our culture is often one of great self-indulgence, isn't it? I'm worth it. Me time. It's 5 o'clock somewhere.

I see that in Facebook sometimes. You know, somebody puts a Facebook post on, you have stacked the dishwasher, time to open the wine and to chill out. Wow, that's quite an undertaking, isn't it?

we're very quick to justify ourselves with all sorts of luxuries and treats. And there's nothing wrong with some luxuries and treats in life, but we have to keep that in perspective, don't we?

Because you see, there's a real sense in the Bible that this life, this side of heaven is wartime for the Christian, for the spiritual battle that we're engaged in.

[21:24] There is so much need, so much gospel work needing resourced. We live in a world heading for judgment, the clock is ticking, and everywhere Christian work is cash-strapped.

The writer Craig Blomberg in his book on giving neither poverty nor riches quotes a survey that was done of Christians in the United States and Christians were asked if they knew that their income

next year would be 10% less than it was this year, where would they cut back in terms of outgoings and their finances?

And the number one answer, and I appreciate this is the United States, but the number one answer was they would eat out less. Well, why not miss one of those meals now?

Not all of them, but maybe one or two now, and give the money to a Christian cause, to Christian ministry. I think there's lots of examples of my own life, and I'm not standing here as some great guru in the subject of giving.

There are lots of examples in my own life where I could be a little bit more modest and use the savings to invest in gospel work that will last for eternity.

[22 : 44] So stretch yourself. Thirdly, give spontaneously. It's great to have a standing order. I want to just underline that point.

It's very sensible. It's very helpful. The church or Christian ministry can then plan on the basis of a stable income. But there are times, of course, when we can make that extra special gift, isn't there? Maybe we have a windfall or some savings come to fruition. And before we just splurge it on some big extra treat, just think about who could be helped by that gift or perhaps a share of that gift.

The missionary who needs a new car. The ministry that needs a new data projector. The repair in the church that never has been able to get done.

And let me say that in those kind of spontaneous extra gifts, there is something very liberating, something particularly joyful about them.

[23 : 50] Those are the gifts, I think, when we really learn the truth of that old saying, giving will never impoverish you nor withholding enrich you. Or, as Paul puts it in verse 15, the one who gathered much did not have too much and the one who gathered little did not have too little.

Now, giving generously and sacrificially, this is an important qualification to the above, is not about, however, giving irresponsibly or recklessly. We have to live within our means.

You see that in verse 12 of chapter 8. He talks about there, the end of verse 11. Now, finish the work so that your eagerness, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it according to your means.

For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what one does not have. That means that we should never get into debt in order to give.

And we should never neglect our primary commitments in order to give. Our children should never go hungry, put it that way, because we're giving to some other Christian mission.

[25 : 09] But all of this in proportion to our wealth and our income can give something, even if it's just the widow's mite. In the Old Testament, the Israelites were commanded to give 10% of their income to God.

That was to the temple and the priests and all the things that were needed to resource God's worship and work in the world. Now there is no such legalistic commandment as we've already noted for Christians.

But many Christians have nonetheless found it quite a good guide for giving. Indeed, if anything, we are so much more blessed as Christians, so much more aware of God's goodness that it would be strange in one sense to want to be less generous than an Old Testament Israelite was asked to be. That, of course, is very much for your conscience and your heart. Of course, not everything that you might give financially to the Lord's work might just go to one particular ministry or one particular place.

You might give directly to support a particular Christian organisation that you have a heart for or an interest in or a particular missionary that you have a relationship to.

[26 : 26] That's good and fine. But let me encourage you just as we come to the end to make the local church a priority for your giving.

Make that the heart of your giving for the simple reason that the local church will only be supported by its members.

The world will help fund many good charitable causes but it won't fund the local church. It won't fund the gospel.

Only Christians will do that. We can't expect local churches elsewhere to fund what we could pay for here.

Greenview, my home church, is my primary responsibility when it comes to my giving along with the other members there. Let me finish by quoting a great Christian author of the last century, A.W.

Tozer.

[27 : 29] And we'll close with this and just the final verse from verse 7 of the passage. Tozer says this, As base a thing as money often is, yet it can be transmuted into everlasting treasure.

It can be converted into food for the hungry and clothing for the poor. It can keep a 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.

faith in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness and in our love for you.

See that you excel in this act of grace also. And may God bless these thoughts from his words. to wie you can see that here's a