

## A Generous Heart Part 2 by Carolyn Carter

Readings – Luke 6:30-38 and 2 Corinthians 4:13 – 5:1

Today's the start of our Generous June, so I wanted to focus on the subject of giving today. Lots of folk get uncomfortable talking about giving but Jesus actually talked about Money loads, not because he loved it but because He knew how important a part of our lives it is..... It is also a very good indicator of what we value most and it was a useful tool for teaching people about the Kingdom of God. It's an area that lots of people have anxiety over and Jesus wanted to let us know that we don't need to worry because God, who clothes the wild flowers with such beauty and provides food for the birds of the air, will also provide for us! He says "how much more valuable are you than birds!" HE's our amazingly generous God, who created all we see - so He is well able to care for us.....His very nature is self-giving – He gave everything in sending Jesus – it in Romans 8:32 "How will He not also, along with Him, graciously give us ALL things?" All things! ....it may not be all we WANT but it IS all we'll NEED.

In this walk of following Jesus, WE are called to grow to be like HIM – children grow to be like their parents – Jesus called God our Father (as we pray in the prayer He taught us).... So we're designed to have generosity as a central characteristic of our lives. God gives out of love and that is how we too are to give – not grudgingly or out of obligation, but cheerfully, and, as I mentioned before, the word the Bible actually uses is 'Hilariously'...with great joy! It is a privilege to give and is part of our worship to God just as much as prayer or singing is.

The Bible teaches that we bring to God the first-fruits of whatever we have (the first bit, not the left-overs) 10% of our income as an offering to Him, because everything we have comes from Him anyway. It's thanksgiving for all He's given to us. Now I know that many people have financial struggles especially at the moment and 10% sounds a lot – but Jesus also teaches us, as we heard in the reading, that it's impossible to out-give God! At our AGM Paul our Treasurer put out the challenge that we all think about increasing our giving by 1% - so we can start there – but let's ask God about how we can give and seek to grow in generosity which reflects our Father's heart. Generosity is going above and beyond. Now I usually try to avoid speaking about anything to do with politics but I was sad to learn that the UK has cut it's Charitable Spending down from 7% to 5% - a difference of £4bn – some might say it makes sense seeing as we're in a recession due to the pandemic or that Aid to developing countries doesn't really help – but thankfully there are people lobbying to reverse these cuts and maintain the generosity and concern for others less fortunate that this country has been known for. Generosity pleases the heart of God.

Sadly some have distorted the words of the Bible and 'prosperity preachers' have and done a lot of harm in this area – but there IS a very clear principle we can see in the Bible - that if you give what you have as an offering out of love to God He will give MORE back to you.

Jesus says if we give 'it SHALL be given unto you' – He didn't say 'it might be'.

God doesn't give in small measures – Jesus says “a good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over will be poured into your lap.” OVERFLOWING!

But He also said straight after “For with the measure you use it shall be measured to you”. So it starts with us – well it actually ALL started with HIM - but He looks for our generosity with what He's given - then gives back to us using the same measure WE'VE used! It may not always be financial – His blessings come in lots of ways – but the Bible speaks about favour from God – Proverbs 11 says - “A generous person will prosper; whoever refreshes others will be refreshed” - there's provision for what we need – you so often see it in the lives of very generous people.

God is interested in rewarding us – He is a Good Father - in the same passage Jesus says when we lend to people without expecting anything back...

“Then your reward will be great and you will be called sons of the Most High”

God not only takes notice, He even says that this is part of what it means to BE a child of God, because that is what HE is like.....He gives to us without expecting/demanding anything back - freely unconditionally full of grace and love.

That's why when we talk about giving it's SO important we don't make it about earning a place in heaven – Jesus is the only one who enables us to enter heaven – we will get there by God's grace, not through striving to earn it. Christianity is the only faith which is clear that we cannot do this ourselves – we need to put our trust in who Jesus is and what He has already done on the cross to rescue us – as Michael Bourne mentioned a while back – we FULLY rely on God!

Our church as well as many charities are looking at tough times ahead because the pandemic has slashed income and all the groups that normally rent space in our church haven't been able to plus our congregation haven't been able to donate as they once did – but God has and will continue to be faithful and provide what we need when we need it to do His work – God doesn't need money! However our giving matters – not because of the need but because of our hearts – God cares about what rules our hearts - the motivation to give is meant to come from our response to God's goodness - it is meant to be an outflow of the heart - to Him and to each other.

Jesus said that if we ask God He will give us His Holy Spirit to live in us like a river – streams of living water that flow outwards – a river not a lake – His love and goodness need to keep flowing out – it's not all about us – He gives us gifts but they are not FOR us – if we try to HOLD ON to the things he blesses us with we will stagnate. Jesus says in Luke 17 “whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will keep it”....the New Living Translation says “If you cling to your life, you will lose it, and if you let your life go, you will save it.”

He not only taught about this but lived it – and called us to live in the same way.

Paul writes (in his letter to the Church at Philippi) about this exact principle -

“Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant” .... here AGAIN we see the response of God to Jesus going low and emptying Himself ....“God exalted Him to the highest place and gave him the name above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow”.

This is like what we read before - God loves to reward ....you can't out-give God!

In this upside-down kingdom where the first are last and the last are first “everyone who exalts himself will be humbled and he who humbles himself will be exalted”. It's about the posture of our hearts – we don't give in order to get – we give ourselves – our lives and hearts to God for Him to spend us however He wants to and then He fills our lives with the wonderful things of His kingdom! At the cross there is an exchange – we give Him our lives and He gives us all that belongs to HIM – that's an unbelievable offer! If you haven't fully decided to take Him up on it today please do!

In 2 Corinthians 8 Paul also writes “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich” That is amazing! Our reading from 2 Corinthians 4 is well worth looking at if you can take some time to. It speaks about the “grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God”. And this is how generosity works – AS we demonstrate grace through giving – unconditionally no-strings attached - giving not only of our money, but of our time and resources and going low to serve as Jesus did THEN thanksgiving will overflow from the hearts and lives of those around us to God. Another thing also sometimes happens – generosity spreads!

The reading from 2 Corinthians is really helpful for us to understand the context of our giving – living in this counter-cultural upside-down way.

“Our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.”

When we give to others - we are making an investment into our future in heaven – Jesus says in Matthew 6 “Do not store up treasures on earth...but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven....for where your treasure is there your heart will be also”. Giving is not really about how MUCH it's about our hearts. So let's grow in generosity and give freely out of love as God does to us. Amen.