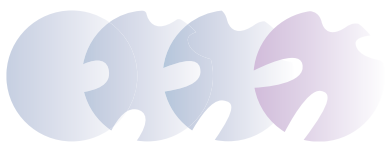


# Personal reflection for stewardship preachers

Preaching about money and generosity is not always easy and the pulpit can be a lonely place for the preacher, however experienced. This short paper offers a brief reflection for those who are called to preach during a Giving in Grace, or any stewardship, programme.



There is an ongoing challenge for clergy and lay leaders in the local church to both teach and to challenge congregations to grace-filled and greater generosity. Preaching is about much more than the occasional money when the church budget is under pressure. More is at stake than the day-to-day survival of the church; more is at stake than our need to resource ministry and mission, however important these two purposes are.

In 2 Corinthians 8:7, Paul urges his readers to 'excel also in this grace of giving' because generosity is a mark of discipleship and of a mature congregation. The stewardship task is to grow generous givers in generous Christian communities. The preacher has a unique, rich, rewarding and challenging part to play in the stewardship ministry of the local church.

### Look inside first

'*Who do you say that I am?*' The question that Jesus asks of Peter he first asks of himself. Jesus faced this question when tempted by the devil to swap the obedience of the cross for a ministry of showy miracles. He knows what kind of suffering messiah he is when he urges people to be silent throughout his ministry. Soon after asking the question of Peter, Jesus will speak with Moses and Elijah about his suffering and death.

The One who enquires of Peter has already asked the question of himself. And so the first challenge to the stewardship preacher is simple, direct and personal: is Jesus Lord of our money? Are we disciples of Jesus in our saving and spending, our borrowing and budgeting, our gaining and our giving? Of course, we never get everything right. Even if we did, no one wants to listen to a know-all, especially one in the pulpit. But before we invite others into the grace of giving, this question must touch *our* heads and hearts. We cannot invite and challenge others to financial faithfulness and generous giving if it is not something we strive for in our lives. As always, the biblical text must be life for the preacher before it can be life for the congregation.

### Lord of all we have

'*Who do you say that I am?*' This is not a request for a casual comment, observation or sound bite. It is a discipleship question from which we cannot shrink and which we must answer. It is a powerful question when asked of our money because it challenges the lordship of Jesus in a unique way. Jesus was clear that we cannot serve God and money (Matt. 6:24) and that we can follow the money to find our heart (Matt. 6:21). It is often said that Martin Luther talked of three conversions: the heart, the head and the wallet, the last being the test of the first two.

The second task of the stewardship preacher is to teach Christian people what the bible say about money. It says much, in over 2000 money passages in the form of proverbs, parables, stories from history, poetry and prophecy, and instruction. Many Christians have simply never



thought about money from a bible perspective. The stewardship preacher must also, therefore, be one who learns herself; who takes time to think and read and study what the bible has to say about wealth and possessions.

### More than words

'Who do you say that I am?' Jesus is inviting more than words for discipleship is as much the choices we make and the actions we take as the words we speak.

The third task of the stewardship preacher is to apply the text and to challenge God's people to greater and more faithful action. Christians who, in so many areas, are faithful and blessed instinctively want to avoid this money issue. It is to ask, as Jesus asked, the hard questions and challenge each Christian to choose how to live around money. We can grasp money to ourselves and possess it or we can receive it as a gracious gift, enjoy it with gratitude, hold it lightly and live generously.

### Differentiation

Peter spoke on behalf of all the disciples but they did not all share his certainty or his insight. We will preach God's word to committed leaders of long standing, to faithful church members and to some at the start of their journey of faith. Some of our hearers review their giving every year; some are generous; some give at a low level and some will not have reviewed their giving for many years. Some will be well informed while others are uncertain how much to give, why or where the money goes.

Our preaching needs to be sensitive to what Giving in Grace calls *differentiation*. One size cannot fit all; one answer cannot suit every question yet the giving challenge must be real for each person. We cannot make the same ask of our new members as of those who have travelled with Jesus for many years. Nor can we fail to speak of sacrificial giving to which Jesus calls his disciples.

Differentiation means that, when preparing to preach, you ask yourself, 'What one thing, what single key message, do I want each of these groupings in our congregation to take away from my sermon?' In the sermon notes are suggestions for how the passage can be applied to each of the three groupings in the church.

### At the crossroads



'Who do you say that I am?' Peter's confession is a crossroads for himself and for Jesus. A suffering messiah is not part of his thinking so Peter makes his confession and is then a stumbling block to the purpose of God. Failure to grasp the nettle of discipleship obedience around money has consequences. Many churches live on a shoestring, others see falling reserves while energy is expended on reducing costs rather than expanding ministry. The task of the stewardship preacher is to connect generosity with resourcing ministry and mission, rather than institutional survival. Discipleship that does not resource the church's ministry is a stumbling block to the purpose of God.

### In conclusion

Stewardship is, of course, more than giving but giving is the hallmark, the litmus test, of financial discipleship. Casual, low-level giving that makes no impact on lifestyle cannot reflect the fundamental question of the Lordship of Jesus: *Who do you say that I am?*