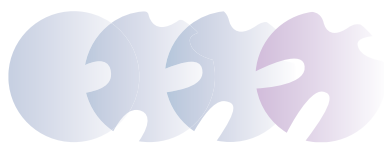


Truly life: why preaching matters

Money talk from the pulpit must be done and done well. Money is close to us and there is an implicit challenge to lifestyle so it is not an easy subject. But connections must be made between Scripture, spirituality, discipleship and our money. This paper reflects on the stewardship preacher's task



Just as the keystone holds the arch in place, so preaching is a core element in stewardship. Without preaching we may have the building blocks of a local church fund-raising effort but not Christian stewardship. Without preaching we lose the heart, the DNA, of stewardship. Paul advised Timothy to, 'Command the rich ... to be rich in good deeds, generous and willing to share...' (1 Tim. 6:17-19). Our preaching teaches and challenges Christians to live well and faithfully with money if we are to, 'lay hold of the life that is truly life'.

An uphill task

To be blunt, congregational attitudes are not encouraging. A quote in the 2012 *Giving Insight* research is illustrative: 'I don't honestly remember hearing a sermon on financial giving.' Just 18% of church members wanted more teaching on giving, nearly half opposed the idea and a third did not know what to think. Preaching money is not an easy ask of clergy or lay preachers. The 2020 *Anglican Giving Survey* suggests that 16% of church members have never heard a sermon on giving. More worrying, although three quarters said they had heard a giving sermon in the last 12 months, 60% said it made no difference to their thinking about giving.

Robert Wuthnow's USA *research* (p166) found that regular churchgoers hearing a stewardship sermon in the last year gave twice as much as those who had not. Moreover, of people who had heard a giving sermon those who saw giving as part of their worship gave three times more than those who didn't value that connection (p267). The point is not that sermons bring in the cash. It is that preaching plays a key part in building a biblical and spiritual framework for people to think about their giving. Preaching creates a culture in which other stewardship tasks can flourish.

To be sure, Wuthnow notes that 7% of church members were more likely to give if the minister talked more about money whilst 30% said they were less likely. But put this in perspective. In every congregation there are people who give nothing - fully one third in the Anglican Giving Survey - and more who give at low levels. So what is the preacher's task around stewardship?

Preaching, not fund-raising

Put simply, our paperwork (letters, brochures and response forms) ask for financial support, and rightly so. But our preaching speaks of the grace of God in Jesus. Preaching speaks of who we are in Christ before it challenges to live and give as Christian people. As noted elsewhere, in 2 Cor 8 Paul speaks of the grace given to the Macedonian church before he celebrating what the Macedonians gave to Jerusalem.

The preacher's task is to connect our discipleship with our money. We are stewards, entrusted with much for our enjoyment (1 Tim. 6), called to be accountable and faithful in our use of it and commanded to be generous in our sharing.



But if money is an affair of the heart, how can Timothy 'command the rich'? In the same way that Israel was told 'you must tithe' (Deut. 14:22) and Paul tells us to, 'excel in this grace of giving' (2 Cor. 8:7). The land Israel enjoyed was a gift from God; so too is grace God's gift to us. Christians *must* give because grace is freely given to us and grace creates the obligation to give generously.

This means, first, that preaching about money should have the content and the character of the grace from which giving is born. It starts by speaking of what God has done. There can be no place for crude appeals, to not paying bills, threatening church closures or castigating greed. Similarly, that can be no inconsistency between our money talk in the pulpit and how we address money 365 days a year.

Second, we should be confident in our preaching. If we feel we are pleading with reluctant givers to spare a little more, our preaching must be hobbled. We will turn, consciously or unconsciously, to other ways of raising money and generate a fund-raising culture in the church. The preacher's task is not to plead or cajole but to invite God's people to be caught up in the grace of giving. To be sure, we share a vision of how growth in giving grows mission. But our preaching aims for more than a balanced budget or a fruitful church ministry. We want to grow generous givers, disciplined in a generous Christian community.

A year-round task

Our consumer culture is a key battleground for spiritual formation and discipleship. An annual money sermon to support an ailing budget won't cut it. Nor can it give hope to those struggling to cope financially.

Unless preaching is a sensitive, thoughtful year-round task, we are in dangerous territory. First, when we preach on money as a one off or very occasionally, we risk overloading or distorting our bible text. It has to say everything we need to say. Second, we limit the scope of stewardship to meeting the needs of the church and so diminish the discipleship challenge. Third, and perhaps most dangerous, we create the wrong culture in the church. Note the insightful words of Pastor Andy Stanley in the pull quote on this page.

Preaching cannot be reluctantly embraced in the hope and mistaken belief that it is job done for the next few years. Instead when done well in a giving programme we can lay a foundation for year-round teaching and preaching, disengaged from the immediate concerns of the church budget. There is more to stewardship

than giving. Preaching must address our borrowing and our budgets, our saving and our spending. If such a breadth of preaching is not modelled from the pulpit, it will likely not happen in the home group, the finance committee or the life of the individual disciple.

The lectionary is our friend

For such year-round preaching the *Revised Common Lectionary* is friend, not foe. We cannot ignore those troublesome money passages. We cannot limbo deftly beneath their challenge. It is often said there are over 2,000 bible verses on wealth and possessions. But they don't all say the same thing. The bible teaching on money is as varied as our experiences of money. Like a diamond, the bible's money teaching has many faces: the observational wisdom of Proverbs, the prophetic challenge to social justice, the world-weary reflections of Ecclesiastes, the life-affirming laws of Deuteronomy, the discipleship teaching of Jesus and the gospel-soaked challenge of Paul to godly living. We cannot capture that breadth, that richness in a single sermon from our favourite passages.

When it comes to stewardship and generosity, do your people know what you want **for them regarding their finances, or do they just know what you want **from** them?**

Pastor Andy Stanley

Sharing stories on the road

Given the pressures of our society it's understandable that many, perhaps most of us think as consumers first and Christians second. Preachers face that same challenge. In preaching they must challenge the easy assumptions of a consumer lifestyle while avoiding an angry, moralistic or wholly negative tone. This is not easy; there are no experts here. Humour, honesty and humility are at a premium. Self awareness is essential to keeping pastoral antennae alert to the reality of indebtedness and money anxiety in the congregation.

Generosity and blessing

Now, to preach generous giving as the means by which we are financially blessed is a consumerist distortion of the gospel. But preachers should be confident to speak of the blessings that generous giving brings. Preachers should encourage people to find freedom and joy in giving, the promise of renewed faith, deepened spirituality. This is how Paul frames his advice to the church at Corinth: of always having enough to be generous, of spiritual blessings and the outpouring of thanksgiving to God. (2 Cor. 9:11ff).