Giving in Grace

Matthew

Sermon notes

Background notes on
five passages in Matthew's Gospel

contents

Matthew 18:21-35

Matt 18:21-35
(NRSV)

Then Peter came and said to him, 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow-slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe." Then his fellow-slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you." But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt. When his fellow-slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?" And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.'

Suggested readings
Genesis 50:15-21 ■ Ps 103:(1-7)8-13 ■ Rom 14:1-12

In this parable the theme of financial indebtedness, an ever-present and harsh reality in Jesus' day as in ours, is used to illustrate the theme of forgiveness. The Greek verb *aphienai* literally means to cancel a debt, and comes to mean forgiveness. By taking a back bearing from the challenge to forgiving grace taught in the parable, we can draw some conclusions about handling financial matters in the light of the kingdom life to which Jesus calls us.

Matthew has brought together a parable from his own source material and a saying of Jesus in 18:21-22 in answer to a question from Peter about the limits of forgiveness. This saying has a parallel in a saying of Jesus in Luke 17:4, which Matthew has edited to now be a question on the lips of Peter. Some point to an inconsistency between the saying of Jesus and the point of the parable: while Peter is urged to forgive without limit, the lord in the parable forgives only once. Others suggest that, in the original parable, the debt to be repaid was a more realistic sum and that Matthew has exaggerated by inserting 'many talents', thus making the debt an impossible sum of money to repay. Both interpretations appear to miss the point of the parable.

The phrase 'many talents' appears to be deliberate hyperbole. This is a debt that could never be paid and the offer to repay is entirely inadequate to the debt incurred. The servant asks for time – what he encounters is grace and mercy. The debt is cancelled and he and his family are set free. The key word here is grace, which in this context means forgiveness and release from an unpayable debt. This is the heart of the gospel: with release should come both freedom and joy.

But an encounter with grace brings a corresponding obligation. The heart of the parable is verse 33; 'should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave as I had mercy on you?' This imperative of grace is expressed by the Greek word *dei* (it is necessary). This same Greek word is found in Matthew 16:21, where it stresses the divine necessity of Jesus' suffering and death. The obligation of grace is made clear at this point. It is not to attempt to repay an impossible debt but to extend that same forgiving, releasing grace to others. We are not invited to compensate in arrears for grace received by giving something back but to embrace the grace that freed us and extend it to others.

Here in this parable this grace is not extended and a second servant with minor debt is imprisoned. This is despite a plea for mercy in verse 29b, the wording of which is identical to the request for time to pay made by the first debtor. Again, the plea is for time to pay; again, the need is for forgiveness and release. This second debt is significantly less than the first. Perhaps it is meant to be a manageable debt; time indeed is all that is needed to pay off the debt but even this grace is denied by the unforgiving servant. More likely, this much smaller debt is still well beyond the capacity of the second servant to pay. Average debt including mortgages per UK household (September 2023) was £65,661, nearly £8,000 unsecured. That's £34,666 per adult representing 100.3% of average earnings. It would take a first time buyer making average savings on an average wage 16 years to save for a house deposit. Indebtedness is not simply a function of the capital owed but of the debt-to-income ratio that determines capacity to repay, quite apart from what can be punitive interest and penalty charges.

the obligation of grace is not to repay an impossible debt but to extend that same grace to others.

The issue, then, is still not the capacity or desire to repay but the heart of the first servant. If we do not believe that we are truly debtors, then we cannot grasp the gift of grace for ourselves and we cannot extend that grace to others. Is the first servant protecting himself from further debt by calling in his assets? Or is it that deep down he does not believe he is really a debtor? The illusion of self-sufficiency, the feeling that we are in charge, is a poor conductor of grace.

The economics of grace is cyclical. In extending grace to others, there is the promise of blessing – a deeper experience of the saving and renewing grace of Christ. By contrast there is a judgement on those who will not extend that grace. This is not a vindictive punishment for not acting well, but the retention of the debt incurred. The experience of grace should result in the extension of grace. Grace not extended is grace not received.

*Peter proposed a rich and **generous** rule of life; Jesus called him to the extravagance of **grace**.*

The reality of unpayable debt and the gospel promise of gracious release from debt (a feature, of course, of the OT Law in Deuteronomy 15:1-11) illustrates the need to receive and extend forgiveness. For the Pharisees, forgiving three times was sufficient. Peter's offer of seven times was born of a glimpse of grace but even this generosity is inadequate. Jesus calls Peter to forgive seventy times – or even seventy times seven. The Greek phrase is found in Genesis 4:24, where it is used of unlimited vengeance; here it is used to express unlimited grace in forgiveness. Peter proposed a rich and generous rule of life; Jesus called him to the extravagance of grace.

Stewardship reflections

The parable uses a shocking and unrealistic method of handling financial debt as an illustration of the liberty of grace that God brings. Those who are in the community of grace will need to handle money in a grace-filled way, certainly exercising personal responsibility but

also refraining from sitting in judgement on others, recognising the reality of low income that underwrites so much personal debt, and extending pastoral care and support to those struggling with money anxiety.

Leaders

We can understand Peter's need to put a price on generosity – seven times? We need to know what we ought to do. But Peter was called beyond calculated generosity into grace. To be true to grace we need to move beyond the question, 'how much I should give back to God?' To enable a realistic response, it is important that church members are aware of financial need. Ambiguity about actual cost is fatal. But as we mature in discipleship and therefore in our attitude to giving, we need to ask a deeper question: 'does my giving really reflect who I am and what I have received from God?' In practical terms, we need to begin to ask, 'What proportion of my income should I be giving to God?'

Peter was called beyond calculated generosity into grace.

Planned givers

Sharing is the key to receiving blessing. Failure to share means that we will ultimately lose what we ourselves have received. This is no different from Jesus' teaching in the Lord's Prayer that the forgiveness of our own sins is in some manner related to our willingness to forgive others. It is not a threat: Jesus is simply saying that this is how grace works. This is also true of the totality of our discipleship – our treasure no less than our time and our talents. The challenge is, are we truly sharing from what we have been given or are we receiving much and retaining it for ourselves?

Plate givers

A parachute jump does not actually involve any jumping – but it does involve letting go of the plane to experience something new and exciting – and terrifying! This parable asks us to let go of being in charge, of believing that we have all the answers and to find a new freedom and joy. It is not easy to let go but it is worth it. So too, learning to give, to let go of our money, is not easy but the freedom and the joy that giving brings is worth the cost.

Matthew 20:1-16

Matt 20:1-16
(NIV)

'For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the labourers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the market-place; and he said to them, "You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right." So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, "Why are you standing here idle all day?" They said to him, "Because no one has hired us." He said to them, "You also go into the vineyard." When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, "Call the labourers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first." When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat." But he replied to one of them, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" So the last will be first, and the first will be last.'

Suggested readings
Jonah 3:10-4:11 ■ Psalms 145:1-8

On the face of it, this parable looks very straightforward. It is a story about the treatment of different groups of workers in a vineyard – or is it? Perhaps it is about envy, about eyes set on denying others rather than set on thanking God for what was given to us. The first labourers agree, before they start work, a wage that is a perfectly acceptable, perhaps even generous, rate for a day's work. The labourers who start work three hours later at 9am are promised simply a just wage (*dikaion*). The assumption is that this will be proportionate to the day's wage of a single denarius. The parable has a sting in the tail, however, because those who work just one hour are paid exactly the same as those who have worked through the heat of the day.

The heart of the parable comes in verse 15: 'Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' The second part of the verse has more of a cutting edge than the English translation indicates. The Greek translated as 'envious' is a Jewish ethical phrase ' the evil eye' (*ho ophthalmos ponēros*), which denotes an intent born of an inner darkness. The workers react badly to a display of generosity despite the fact that they themselves are recipients of a wage that is fair, even generous. This is not about just rewards in the workplace but a deeper envy and covetousness that puts self at the centre and is not only self-seeking but also denies generosity to other people. The affluence and access to credit in a consumer culture makes us shortsighted: we privilege the present over planning for the future. It also gives us very good peripheral vision! We define our wealth and happiness not only by what we have but by what we see others have. Here it is the apparent injustice of those who worked less having the same that drives the envy of those who worked a full day.

There is, of course, no virtue in poverty. This parable cannot be used to reinforce the right of capitalism to do what it pleases with its money. The point of the parable is that there is negotiation with the workers, a fair price agreed, the creation of employment, the equal treatment of part-time and full-time workers and prompt payment on the day, as the Law of Moses required.

The Greek word for 'grumbling' that Matthew uses (*gongguzō*) occurs only this once in his Gospel. Tellingly, it is the same word used in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the OT used by the Gospel writers) in Exodus 16 to describe the grumbling of the people of Israel, which led to the gift of manna and quails in the desert.

The corrosive grumbling of people is met by the abundant provision of God for his people, under which none can profit or hoard and none goes short. The gift of manna is at one and the same time a blessing and a judgement on the people of Israel: a blessing to those who trust and collect what they need; a judgement on those who over-collect and cannot trust for Sabbath provision that the manna will last two days. In 2 Corinthians chapter 9, Paul will use the same story to illustrate the equality and sufficiency of God's provision as the basis for calling the Corinthians to proportionate giving to the needy church in Jerusalem.

The key word here is perhaps '"contentment', a word Paul uses in Philippians 4:11. The gospel challenge is to learn to be content, for all we have is born of God's grace and generosity. Our measure is not to be what other people receive but the measure that God gives to us. So we might ask, 'What prompts our own discontent?' Is it the power of advertising that tells us what we should own, or the promise of an unsecured loan to get what we want, or comparison with those who appear to have and be more than we are?

learn to be content for all we have is born of God's grace and generosity

Or, to take the image of the evil eye, which Matthew uses – how do we see these things? If we look at a beautiful piece of embroidery (and this might be a simple sermon illustration) we can either see the pattern on the top or the chaos underneath. For some there is a pattern of grace that is reflected in contentment, for others there is the disorder of unfulfilled material desires.

There is a hard lesson in this parable. The workers are told to work in a vineyard, an OT metaphor for Israel's relationship with God. The Greek word *hupagete*, translated as 'go', is used in verses 4 and 7 to send workers into the vineyard; the same word is used of their exclusion in verse 14. It is grace that calls workers into God's vineyard; it is the unwillingness or inability to be gracious and respond to such generosity that results in leaving the vineyard. Self-exclusion from the kingdom results from adopting a miserly, covetous spirit that cannot rejoice in generosity.

somehow money is the raw nerve of life that, when touched, sparks the most profound reaction.

Stewardship reflections

Of course, the question of generosity runs much deeper than simply our financial dealings: it includes our time and our talents as well as our treasure. But the parable is not told about money for no reason. Somehow money is the raw nerve of life that, when touched, sparks the most profound reaction. It is possible to feign, even to ourselves, the depth of our discipleship. But it is our attitudes and actions around money and giving that expose us as we really are. If our eyes are set on God and on thankfulness, then we may more easily learn to be content. If our eyes are set on our neighbours who have more than us, we will more readily be discontent and more inclined to grumble.

preaching notes

Matthew 20:1-16

Leaders

One of the key elements in the parable is the employer's claim to sovereignty over his wealth: 'am I not free to do what I will with my money?' As Paul Schervisch notes, money gives us freedom and choice, but it cannot guarantee the quality of the choices we make. The freedom of this employer is expressed in his choice to be generous and just. Would the early workers in the vineyard have made the same choice; would we? The challenge to mature Christians is to move beyond calculating what we give and discovering a new and deepening spirit of generosity, which Jesus teaches lies at the heart of kingdom life.

Planned givers

'I have learned,' says St Paul, 'to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty' (Phil. 4:11-12). Before we can know how much to give, we have to know how much we need to live. Without contentment we will always be seeking more, and that is not fertile ground to grow generosity. Discontent is like a river periodically bursting its banks and flooding the land around it. We need to establish the channels. The discipline of setting aside an amount we wish to give to God's work through his church at the beginning of the week or month is an effective discipline. When we discipline ourselves to giving as a priority, it revolutionises our self-understanding. Before we seek for ourselves, we exercise a grateful generosity in giving. It is a reminder of who is, or should be, at the centre.

Money gives us freedom and choice, but it cannot guarantee the quality of the choices we make.

Plate givers

Charles Swindoll tells the story of a GI in London in the later days of the war. A young boy watched wistfully as he went into a bakery to buy a pile of doughnuts. On leaving, and seeing the ragged, hungry child, the GI asked if he also would like some doughnuts – and gave him a dozen. As he walked away, he felt a tug at his greatcoat – it was the young boy: 'Hey mister, are you God?' We reflect the nature of God most when we learn to be generous. The hardest and most rewarding area in which we can learn to be generous is with our money. Making a simple definite decision to give regularly from the first of what we have and not from what is left over is to make a decision to be a little like God.

Matthew 21:33-46

Matt 21:33-46
(NRSV)

'Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watch-tower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, "They will respect my son." But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, "This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance." So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?' They said to him, 'He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.'

Jesus said to them, 'Have you never read in the scriptures:

"The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes"?

Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.'

When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

Suggested readings
Isaiah 5:1-7 ■ Psalm 80:8-16

This parable is the middle of three for which the central theme is criticism of the Jewish leaders. Matthew draws the substance of the parable from Mark, which is of particular interest in that it contains a specific reference to the killing of the landowner's son. Matthew's own concerns are shown in the way he edits his Markan material and in what he adds to his source.

Matthew's specific emphasis is upon judgement. In verse 34, Matthew elaborates Mark's simple phrase 'in time' into the much more forceful 'when the time of the fruits (i.e. the harvest) had come…' The verb here is *engisen*, the same verb used in Matthew of the dawning of the kingdom in 3:2, 4:17 and 10:7. Most tellingly, Matthew adds a specific reference to the removal of the kingdom from the Jews and their replacement by another people (*ethnos*), a people which will bear fruit. This emphasis is found only in Matthew's version of the parable.

The parable can be read as an allegory: the two sets of servants represent the former and latter prophets, the son represents Jesus and the landowner is God. Matthew's editing of his source notes that the son was taken outside the vineyard (which Rabbinic interpretation identified with the city of Jerusalem) before he was killed which supports this reading. It is not clear what produce the servants were sent to collect. It may be to collect rent as part of a lease agreement, or to collect the entire produce of the vineyard with the tenants, presumably, retaining a portion for their own subsistence.

It should be noted immediately, however, that this is a conservative reading of the text. On this reading a landowner is denied what is rightfully his by wicked tenants. The stewardship application is persuasive and clear: we are to give God what is rightfully his. Such teaching chimes with the teaching that God is owner and giver of all we have. But even if we accept a conservative reading of the story we should not easily conclude such a conservative and privatised stewardship application and fail to recognise the economic context of the story. There is a more radical reading of the text which reflects the perspective of the poor. On this reading the parable deals with an absent landlord, perhaps a despot (see below) for whom land is a commodity and the produce of the land taken as profit and taken away from the community and out of the country. On this reading the denial of God's ownership of the vineyard rests not with the tenants but with the landlord. The actions of the tenants may not be those

of wicked usurpers but the protest of those for whom land is a gift of God which blesses the community.

Regardless of which reading we prefer the key to understanding the parable is the identification of the vineyard with Israel. The imagery is stronger than in Mt 20:1-16) Verse 33 quotes the vineyard passage in Isaiah 5:2 almost verbatim, The emphasis is on the contrast between the fullness of God's provision and his gracious choice of Israel and the self-seeking and self-serving of the human actors in the story. It may be that the tenants are indeed wicked, that they would accumulate everything to themselves and pay no honour to the owner of the vineyard. It may be that the landowner is violating the gift of land which God entrusts to his people in seizing its fullness for himself and failing to honour the gift of God. It is noteworthy that the Isaiah vineyard passage goes on to picture the houses of the rich isolated in swathes of unproductive land that they have taken from the poor (Isaiah 5:8-10). On either reading there is a violation of God's Lordship and purpose by those called to be stewards of the gift and that violation turns on wealth and our desire to hold it tightly. God's choice of Israel and the fullness of his provision form the background of a parable that ends ultimately in the removal of the kingdom from Israel.

There are consequences in failing to attend to the obligations created by the gift itself

The hard message of this parable is that grace, calling and gift are not incompatible with judgement. There are consequences in failing to attend to the obligations created by the gift itself. Matthew underlines the sovereignty of the land owner by the repeated use of 'his' (*autou*) in relation to the vineyard. He also refers to him as 'house master' (*oikodespotēs*) in verse 33, a favourite phrase that he adds to Mark's version, and later in the story refers to him as 'lord of the vineyard' (*ho kurios tou ampelōnos*). The move to collect the fruits of harvest is an assertion of lordship, for good or for ill, over the produce of the vineyard.

we should not strive to own what is entrusted to us as a gift

However we read the parable it is clear that how we handle money is either in harmony or in tension with the values of the kingdom of heaven in our daily lives. To be sure, the bible understands God as the true owner and giver of our wealth and possessions. We may well see in this parable a clear challenge to honour God with our first fruits. We should not strive to own what is entrusted to us as a gift, a warning that is candidly made in Deuteronomy chapters 6 and 8 as Israel pauses before taking possession of the land.

But we must be careful on such a reading not to so spiritualise and individualise the meaning that we lose sight of the harsh, shared experience of poverty that would be well known to Jesus' first hearers. Land is God's gift and provision to his people. It is the source of wealth, a place of family and community and a place which sustains life. Land is not there to be parcelled up, sold and resold for profit creating a gap between rich and poor. Such a gap is powerfully pictured in Isaiah 5:8-10, as much a part of the meaning of the vineyard passage as the preceding verses which stress God's loving abundant provision.

preaching notes

Matthew 21:33-46

Stewardship reflections

In the parable, the vineyard is richly provided for and left in the care of tenants. This is a lovely picture of stewardship: that the God who provides what we need also extends his trust to us. The challenge is to live well with this gift, this provision. Whether our reading of this text is of wicked tenants or a rapacious landlord there will always be for us the temptation to hold tightly and possess what is given to us to hold lightly and share generously. Failure to honour God with all that is due to him, the decision to accumulate and take to ourselves what is given as a gift, is not so much the breaking of a rule as a betrayal of the trust shown to us by a God who amply supplies our needs.

Leaders

This passage is a statement of who and what we are before God: stewards of all God has given. It is the truth behind David's words prayed at each Eucharist: 'Lord all things come from you and of your own do we give you.' The reality of the human heart is that what we are called to steward we desire to possess. The sadness is that in the desire to possess we can lose our liberty – a cage is a cage even if the bars are made of gold. Albert Schweizer once wrote: 'if we have something that we cannot give away it is not a possession any longer – it possesses us.'

church ministries can be hindered, made ineffective, even ended due to a failure to be adequately resourced.

The parable goes further and we cannot escape its force. Our decision to withhold has consequences. The kingdom is taken and given to others. The reality is that church ministries can be hindered, made ineffective, even ended, due to a failure to be adequately resourced.

Planned givers

Whichever interpretation of the text we may take either the tenants or the landlord are asserting their ownership of the produce of the vineyard. Failure to give and to give generously is more than a dereliction of external religious duty; it is an implicit statement of ownership. As Jesus himself said, what we do with our money says something about what is in our hearts. Our giving, even our tithing, does not mean the rest is ours but a reminder that everything we have comes from God.

Plate givers

Tenants, stewards, caretakers: whatever word we use as Christians we do not own but we do benefit from the richness of what is entrusted to us. Our words around money should be those of joy, blessing, privilege and celebration. Words such as guilt, embarrassment, rules or anxiety have no place in our discussions of financial discipleship. If we withhold from God what is due to him, it is not a matter of breaking a rule but a breach of God's trust.

Matthew 22:1-14

Matt 22:1-14
(NRSV)

Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: 'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. Again he sent other slaves, saying, "Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet." But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, maltreated them, and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. Then he said to his slaves, "The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet." Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.

'But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?" And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, "Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." For many are called, but few are chosen.'

Suggested readings
Isaiah 25:1-9 ■ Psalm 23

In this parable, Matthew uses material common to both Matthew and Luke but not found in Mark – and uses it with considerable freedom. In Luke, the parable concerns an evening meal thrown by a housemaster; here it is a wedding banquet for the son of a king. Matthew adapts his material to more closely correlate with the details of the preceding parables. So Luke's single servant becomes plural while the introduction of a second set of servants and mention of the murder of some servants corresponds to the parable of the Rented Vineyard. By contrast, Matthew omits Luke's account of space being found and a second invitation to the marginalised being made.

Matthew clearly has his own emphases in the recasting of this parable. He alone adds a second parable, which today reads as a slightly awkward extension referring to the casting out of a guest who did not have wedding clothes. As in preceding parables, there is an emphasis on the end times of human history – when God's purposes for, and his blessing of, Israel will be revealed. A wedding banquet was one of the images associated with the coming of the Messiah in Jewish hope. Also present is a graphic emphasis on judgement, in the destruction of the city.

Like the preceding parables, this parable turns on the sonship of Jesus. The cycle of disbelief cannot go on for ever; the teaching and ministry of Jesus standing in the line of the prophets of old requires a decision, which in itself is judgement for good or ill upon those who hear.

This particular wedding invitation is not accompanied by a polite RSVP! Declining to attend is not an option. In both the Bible (2 Sam. 10:4) and the writing of the Jewish historian Josephus, who was nearly a contemporary of Jesus, the refusal of the king's invitation is tantamount to open rebellion. The first invitation to celebrate turns upon the fact that those who receive the invitation owe their protection, their land and prosperity to the king. The second invitation carries a note of eschatological urgency, 'everything is ready'. These two invitations include an element of obligation based on blessing and promise received.

The gospel is gracious invitation but acceptance, which is itself an act of grace, implies recognition of sovereignty and, with that, appropriate obligation. Those invited reject the invitation to rejoice, to celebrate and to honour that sovereignty. Instead they focus on their business activities, rejecting the authority of the one whose

patronage is the source of their wealth and power. Matthew cuts short the polite, almost defensible, excuses offered in Luke's version of the story. The claim of lordship and the invitation to celebrate exceeds all other claims in the lives of the king's people. The danger in all discipleship is that, while pursuing that which is in itself good and right and godly, our ordinary day-to-day living, we can lose sight of that which has a higher claim upon our lives, namely the lordship of Christ. And so often it is the pursuit of business, of financial gain and accumulation of possessions that blinds us to that greater claim of lordship in our lives. In focusing upon the gift, we lose sight of the Giver and the call to share in the joy of his life.

in focusing upon the gift, we lose sight of the Giver and the call to share in the joy of his life

Interestingly, the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas preserves a version of this parable in which a warning is given about trading and losing focus. Some think that the Thomas version reflects Jesus' original parable more closely than Matthew does; more likely it is an editing of a Gospel account. However, the Thomas version is an indication of how the parable actually played out in the preaching and storytelling of the early church. There would seem to be some anxiety around the tensions between the accumulation of possessions, and faithful discipleship.

For Matthew, once again the servants represent the OT prophets urging the people of Israel to return to their status and calling as God's chosen people. The Greek phrase *tous keklamenous*, translated as 'those who had been invited', is a technical term for the people of God. The servants are then sent out again, this time to the outlets of the city, not to be understood as the crossroads but the points of exit in the city walls, to seek new guests. Here too is the gracious invitation of the gospel to the marginalised but acceptance once again carries with it appropriate obligation. Surely this is the meaning of the slightly awkward parable that Matthew tags on in verses 11–14. Here a wedding guest does not have suitable clothes and is dismissed from the wedding feast into judgement. Matthew adds to Luke's version of the story that the invitation to the marginalised brought in both the good and the bad. His addition reflects the concern of the early church for discipline. The kingdom of God is an untidy business.

how we handle money either hinders or helps us enter the abundant life Jesus promised

Stewardship reflections

Stewardship is what we do after we say that we believe; mature stewardship acknowledges that God has a prior claim on our lives that supersedes all our priorities and preferences. This can sound harsh and can certainly be misinterpreted as a cruel form of self-denial. Jesus talks frequently abut money, much more so in fact than about faith or prayer. This is not, as Carol Johnson notes, because he was obsessed by money. Rather, Jesus was obsessed by the abundant life that he promises to us. He knew that how we handle money either hinders or helps us enter the abundant life Jesus promised.

preaching notes

Matthew 20:1-16

Leaders

Mature discipleship acknowledges God's prior claim on all areas of our lives, even those of work and family. This obligation is born of God's love for us in Jesus and the invitation is to enter into joy and to celebrate. It is perhaps all too easy for discipleship to focus on perceived obligation, and to lose its joy. All that we have is gift and grace; therefore cultivating a spirit of thankfulness is a key part of discovering and growing into joy. The discipline of planned giving is a key element in acknowledging God's lordship in a crucial area of our lives. It expresses thankfulness for all we have received. The key question is not 'how much do I give' but whether my gift truly reflects who I am and what I have received from God.

failure to provide adequate financial resources means that church ministries are often cramped and ineffective

Planned givers

It is hard to acknowledge Jesus as Lord when our own priorities are front and centre in our lives. In Luke's version of the parable, those invited offer polite excuses almost defensible under the Law of Moses. In Matthew, all that is abbreviated to the telling phrase, 'They paid no attention'. Their lives and livelihood were the first claim on their lives and it is this that prevents us from entering into the joy of our discipleship. More than that, our private choices have consequences for church. Matthews' account of soldiers sacking the city may reflect the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 or simply be literary convention, but the point is that the citizens are dealt with as the leading men of a city in rebellion. Failure to provide adequate financial resources means that church ministries are often cramped and ineffective. Money, which is a gift from God to be celebrated, becomes a burden and what should be a joyful sharing of resources between the parts of the body of Christ is transformed into a fearful, defensive and resentful calculation of how much we can afford.

we are invited to joy; we cannot settle for less by taking it for granted

Plate givers

The heart of the parable is not the judgement of a city but the gracious and beautiful picture of an invitation to joy sent to those who never dreamed they might be invited. It is the joy of the surprise 40th birthday party, the reunion with old friends, the award for community service, recovery from serious illness, the rediscovery of life after bereavement or divorce, the job you never thought you would get, the reconciliation with a friend you thought lost for ever. The gospel invitation is all this and much, much more. We are invited to joy; we cannot settle for less by taking it for granted. Such gracious invitation requires the best that we have and the best that we are.

Matthew 22:15-22

Matt 22:15-22
(NRSV)

Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, 'Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?' But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, 'Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax.' And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, 'Whose head is this, and whose title?' They answered, 'The emperor's.' Then he said to them, 'Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.' When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

Suggested readings
Isaiah 45:1-7 ■ Psalms 96:1-9

In the preceding three parables, Matthew has departed from his chief source, the Gospel of Mark, but returns to Mark as he recounts the deft attempt of the religious and political leaders to trap Jesus on the legitimacy of paying taxes to Rome. This head tax (*kenson* = census) had to be paid using Roman coinage. To the obvious political implications of the question is to be added a moral – religious – concern. The Roman coin carried an image and inscription of Caesar and this was highly offensive to the Jews, as indeed was any human image. So much so that at least one rabbi, Nahum ben Simai, argued that holiness was proved by not looking at a coin bearing an image.

This double whammy of political and religious objection is mirrored in the strange pairing of Herodians and Pharisees who test Jesus with their question. The Herodians supported Herod, the puppet king under Rome, and therefore had a vested interest in the political status quo. If Jesus denied that it was right to pay taxes to Rome then they could accuse Jesus of an act of political rebellion. For their part it seems as though the Pharisees did not all agree about whether it was offensive to handle a coin which bore an image, such as the one they brought to Jesus. But despite their differences on the subject they stand to gain by exposing Jesus as one who supported paying taxes to an occupying army and also paying those taxes with a coin that bore a secular image of the occupying power. Certainly the temple tax which supported the priests and the temple could not be paid in Roman coin.

Jesus answer is both subtle and brilliant, in that it defuses a dangerous situation and makes a telling point against his opponents. Again we see the rabbinic custom of answering question by question. To understand the answer we need to give some ground first. Jesus effectively states that taxes are to be paid, just as Paul would later affirm the legitimacy of prayer for, and taxes paid to, secular authorities, who hold any authority they have only under God (Rom. 13:1-6). However, the payment of tax to one who has the authority to require it does not of itself authenticate the legitimacy of that authority. We have much richer choices than the extremes of political revolution or other-worldly piety, which the Jewish leaders try to offer to Jesus. Our bank is part of the immoral western refusal to cancel third-world debt, mis-selling products, profiting from indebtedness and much more. But its stock market performance helps pay our pensions; it employs people; and keeping money under the mattress is not a safe option. Part of the richness of choice

we have is to know what can be achieved now and what cannot. What is very interesting is that, in Luke's version of Jesus' trial, one of the key charges against him is that he urged the non-payment of taxes to Rome. This gives us some idea of how Jesus' attitude left its mark in Gospel tradition.

The power of Jesus reply lies in his use of an *argumento e minore* – acknowledging a less important point to illustrate a greater principle. In Jesus' day, monetary exchange, though significant, was not as dominant a factor in human life and social exchange as it is today. The passage contains a significant play on words: is it right to give taxes (*dounai*) to Caesar? Give back (*apodounai*) to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. The Greek verb 'give back' is used of the repayment of a debt and implies obligation. If the coin belongs to Caesar, then let him have it, in the limited sphere in which he has authority. But render to God the things of God (*ta tou Theou*) in the totality of your obligations to him. The argument progresses from the limited and dubious authority of Caesar to acknowledgement of the totality of God's claim, which in and of itself relativises the authority of Caesar.

money always bears someone's image and the temptation is to want it to bear our own

Stewardship reflection

In one sense it is true that money is simply a neutral medium of exchange, neither good nor bad. But in another sense, money is never morally neutral; it always reflects someone's values in the way it is used. Two factors need to be borne in mind. First, that my unrestricted exercise of the freedom of choice that money can offer may be oppressive to others. Second, over time, money has become (in most cultures) the primary means of human exchange. It has become increasingly sophisticated and impersonal and the ends it serves more remote from how we earn our living. Money always bears someone's image and the temptation is to want it to bear our own. Neither handling an image, nor paying tax, compromises our true freedom. But we do not find freedom by swapping Caesar's face for our own.

Leaders

American dollar bills bear the inscription 'In God we trust'; they also carry a picture of George Washington. There is a double challenge here. Does the use of our money in the day-to-day world of George Washington and taxes reflect the truth that God has ultimate ownership and authority and that we trust in him? To give in a planned, thoughtful manner that is proportionate to our income is a statement of trust. But we need also to ask a deeper question – whose face is on our money? It should not be ours. We should receive what we have as a gift and live generously, receive what we have as grace, and live graciously. It is then that we enter into the joy and the freedom of giving.

preaching notes

Matthew 22:15-22

Planned givers

Honouring God in all the things of God includes our money. But it is a sensitive area and one that has a tendency to provoke extremes of reaction. Some object to the idea of discussing money; others fall into the perils of prosperity teaching. For some, money must be hoarded in quantity; others are embarrassed by what they have. Self-seeking and guilt are equally poor conductors of grace in this area of giving.

The pound coin has a Latin inscription along the side: *Decus et tutamen*, which means 'an ornament and a safeguard'. This inscription goes back as early as 1662 and was put on the side of the coin as evidence or safeguard that the coin had not been clipped. The value of a coin could be reduced by shaving the precious metal off the side of the coin!

there is no area of life, certainly not money, that is outside the sovereignty of God

Planned giving is the safeguard, the *tutamen*, that we *do* render to God all that is God's in the area of financial discipleship. When we do not review our planned giving, it is akin to shaving or clipping the value of what we give to God.

Plate givers

Because the tax coin bore Caesar's image, some religious people did not want to touch it. Today, people often want to keep financial matters private and separate from their faith. We have to handle money; the question is how we do it. If we fail to teach our children about the important things in life, it does not mean that they do not learn, it simply means that they will learn about it from someone else. Those values may well not be ones we want for our kids.
The story of Caesar's coin reminds us that there is no area of life, certainly not money, that is outside the sovereignty of God. We cannot privatise our money as though it has nothing to do with our faith. The church does need money for the good things it does. But we talk money, not because of those needs, but because we need to be faithful and generous with the money God has entrusted to us.