

Sermon reflections

Very Reverend
Peter Howell-Jones
Dean of Blackburn Cathedral



the rich ruler



In the 1953 film, *The Million Pound Note*, Gregory Peck is a poor sailor given a £1 million note. Whenever he tries to spend it people treat him like a king and give him everything for free. Yet in the end the £1million almost costs him his dignity and the woman he loves.

We don't know why the rich ruler asked about eternal life. Unhappiness? After all industrialist and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie noted long ago that millionaires seldom smile! One of the problems of rising affluence is that 'enough' always means just a little more – TV and advertising make sure of that! And money can get in the way of the relationships which are so essential to our happiness.

Whatever the reason Jesus challenges him to give his money to the poor but the price is too high. The rich man walks away, broken-hearted, knowing what he leaves behind. We think of money as opening doors but here it closes the door to life, not just eternal life but to the life of this new community of disciples who put Jesus before their financial choices. He is invited to let go of his money because we can't travel light with heavy baggage, or engage with others when we are full of ourselves.

And money can open or close doors for us too. For the rich in the story are you and me. We may feel we have a modest lifestyle but the average UK salary of around £33,000 in 2023 puts us in the top 1% of the world's rich list. We might dream of a £1 million lottery win but that average wage for 30 years will make us responsible for well over £1million in our lifetime.

This story challenges us about how we live with money, the choices that we make. And the challenge to generosity is one that we cannot duck. A generous heart and a generous lifestyle will open doors for other people in need. It will also open doors for us to new life in Christ and in relationship with his people, his disciples. But following Jesus with our money is not easy. It has to cash out in our day to day living and attitudes. Some years ago Fr John Dresko, an orthodox priest, wrote the following which has not been translated from the original American:

"My gift to God is a genuine reflection of my heart. If I give \$400 per month to the bank on my car loan, but think the church is fleecing me for \$20 per month, I have a heart problem. If I do my grocery shopping and write a check when I leave for \$100 so my family can be fed, but think \$20 per month is too much for the Bread of Life, I have a heart problem. If I can go to the package store and drop \$20 for a bottle of liquor but gripe about the costs of sharing the Blood of Christ, I have a heart problem. If I cheat the church out of regular giving by pleading about my 'cash flow' while ignoring the fact that the church has the same bills and the same 'cash flow', I have a heart problem." ■

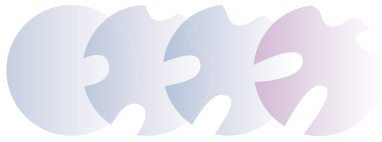


**Reflection
Questions**

1. Millionaires seldom smile: in what ways might money make us unhappy?
2. What do you make of the 'heart problem challenge from Fr John Dresko?
3. How might generosity 'open the door' for us as we seek to follow Jesus more closely?

Peter Howell Jones was installed as Dean of Blackburn in 2017. Trained as a classical singer and conductor Peter served as a parish priest and Director of Mission and Evangelism in Birmingham and then Vice Dean of Chester Cathedral.

the rich fool



Reflection Questions

1. The idea of God as the true owner of all that you earn, have and own is a challenging one. How does that make you feel and why?
2. Is there one item or decision or lifestyle choice you would find it especially difficult to 'sign over ownership' to God?
3. In what ways can affluence blind us to our obligations to the poor?

Scottish businessman and philanthropist Sir Tom Hunter started out selling trainers from the back of a van. At just 37, he sold Sports Division for £260 million and went on from there. Hunter makes money but his dream is to give £1 billion to charity. £100 million to the Clinton Hunter Development Initiative in Africa is not a bad start.

Hunter wanted to give well so he took advice from philanthropic thinker, Vartan Gregorian who at their first meeting and to Hunter's astonishment said, 'Tom, remember none of this is yours'. It's this challenge that lies at the heart of our gospel story.

The farmer knows his business and his actions seem reasonable. He probably gave alms to the poor and tithed his harvest. We all want a pleasant retirement with a decent pension. Yet he is a fool because, as we say today, 'It's all about me'! He believes himself accountable to no one, the owner and beneficiary of all he has. He may worship in the synagogue but in his heart, his soul and his business mind there is, as the fool says, no God (Psalm 53:1; Isaiah 32:6; Jeremiah 4:22).

This is not only a matter of personal discipleship. In Old Testament thinking not honouring God as owner and giver must result in injustice and in neglect of the poor and disadvantaged. To store the harvest drives up the price of grain. 'People curse the man who hoards grain, but blessing crowns him who is willing to sell,' says Proverbs 11:26.

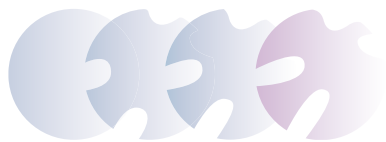
One of the problems of increasing affluence is that it can blind us to our obligations to the poor when in fact this is at the heart of true worship: 'to act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God' (Micah 6:8). Recovering our spiritual sight requires practical action. Generosity of giving and living can help reignite the heart of true worship. The key that unlocks generous giving and living is the recognition that he is the true owner and that all we have is a gift entrusted to us. In his poem Father to Son Carl Sandburg writes:

*A tough will counts. So does desire.
So does a rich soft wanting.
Without rich wanting nothing arrives.
Tell him too much money has killed men
And left them dead years before burial:
The quest of lucre beyond a few easy needs
Has twisted good enough men.*

Money can bless or burden us and others. God grant to us a tough will to make those hard decisions at home, at leisure and in work. God give us a rich, soft wanting that is more than the accumulation of more lest we are dead years before burial.

'Righteousness and generosity are inseparable. The person whose heart longs for God also longs to give to others.' (Dillon Burroughs) ■

Zacchaeus



Reflection Questions

1. Think of a time you have been moved to give generously: what motivated your decision to give?
2. What are some of the modern day challenges if we are to 'straighten out our financial dealings'?
3. Do you agree that generosity is the litmus test of our discipleship around money?

A collection of church jokes includes the following true story. As a vicar drops a friend at a railway station a stranger mistakes the car for a taxi, climbs in and asks to be taken to a hotel. On arrival he offers a £5 fare. When the vicar explains, the stranger pockets the £5 and offers a 50 pence piece for the church collection. That's tithing for you!

So what moves us to generosity? What makes us want to give? What makes generosity a natural thing to want to do? A friend's generosity was challenged when a Christian who delivered Christmas shoeboxes in Romania told how he gave a child an orange. The child held it in wonder and said, 'is all this for me?'

Should we not be moved by need? Should not gratitude for all that has been given to us move us to generosity? Generosity is natural when life and love takes hold of us so why should it be different when we are gently held, sustained, challenged by the love and grace of God?

That's how it was for Zacchaeus. He has heard the rumour of forgiveness that goes wherever Jesus goes. He climbs a tree to see Jesus and then finds Jesus looking at him, looking for him. That is what grace is all about. As a tax collector for the hated Romans, with a reputation for corruption and profiteering Zacchaeus is not popular. No wonder, then, that people grumble when Jesus comes to tea. But that meal, like our shared Sunday communion, is a public, prophetic sign of saving grace.

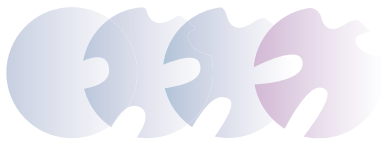
In response to Jesus' presence two remarkable things happen in Zacchaeus, both with generosity in their DNA. First Zacchaeus pledges to give half of his wealth to the poor. Such generosity springs from a sense of being accepted, forgiven, welcomed. It far exceeds the requirements of the tithe and it helps Zacchaeus re-engage with the community of God's people. Secondly, Zacchaeus promises to straighten out his financial dealings. Again his promise to repay those he has defrauded four times over far exceeds the requirements of the law. The extravagant grace of Jesus invites an extravagant response.

Faithfulness with our money is a natural part of discipleship and generosity is the litmus test, the hallmark of that faithfulness. It is a challenge to the 50p tip and to the £5 fare. Such generosity is more than what we put on the offering plate, more than personal piety. For Zacchaeus and for us grace invites us to give generously. St Paul says "It is required of stewards that they should be found trustworthy' (1 Cor 4:2). How we think and feel around money and how we choose to use it reflect that trustworthiness and faithfulness.

Jesus came so that everyone might have life in all its fullness (John 10:10). Entering into that fullness must surely involve generous living.

'We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give.'
(Winston Churchill) ■

the widow's mite



**Reflection
Questions**

1. When the offering plate comes around what goes through our minds and our hearts?
2. How have you heard this story explained in sermons or bible studies?
3. When we give to God's work in our church do we usually think about giving our first and our best?

A story is told that, while walking at Balmoral, Queen Victoria got caught in the rain. Calling at a cottage, she was grudgingly offered a tatty umbrella. She went on her way and the next day a courtier in a splendid coach returned the umbrella. As the courtier left, he heard the owner say, "If I had known who she was, she could have had my best umbrella."

As Jesus sat in the Temple he observed the giving of the rich and the poor. Some things never change. Just as today those who have money give more in cash terms than those on lower incomes. And, when they give, those on lower incomes *give more in proportion to their income* than those with more money. The gifts of the wealthy that Jesus observed were big gifts but what drew his attention was the giving of a poor widow who in percentage terms gave far more.

It is easy to miss the point of this story. It is not that only the heart matters to God so as to justify a small gift. It does not teach us to give till we are poor nor to give all we have. If true, salvation could not come to Zacchaeus who gave just half of what he had. It is not that the widow gave the *last* that she had to give but that she gave the *best* she had to give. As someone has said provocatively, the widow's mite is an acceptable gift if given with the widow's heart and on the widow's income.

The issue is not how much we give but a far deeper question: how much of me and the life God has given to me, is truly reflected in the gift I give? The gifts Jesus observed were given in the place of worship. The splendour of the temple, as in our churches, speaks of God's glory but also of his presence with his people. That is the context in which we give.

If, when the offering plate comes around, we really knew who we were giving to, then whether we have much or little, we would give our 'first fruits', our first and best not what is left over. If we saw the difference the ministry of our church makes in people's lives rather than bills and budgets our giving would go beyond calculation of its needs and how deserving we think those needs are. If we knew that God was the owner and giver of all we have and are then our giving could never be casual, begrudged or reluctant. Our gifts would go beyond what we can afford when we have done everything else that we need to do with our money.

Elizabeth Gilbert, author of *Eat, Pray, Love*, concludes. *'In the end, though, maybe we must all give up trying to pay back the people in this world who sustain our lives. In the end, maybe it's wiser to surrender before the miraculous scope of human generosity and to just keep saying thank you, forever and sincerely, for as long as we have voices.'*

That 'miraculous scope of human generosity' is captured in this picture of a woman who gave generously in the place of worship. For Christians such generosity is rooted in the generosity of a God who never stops giving to us and invites us to be caught up in the grace of his giving. ■